ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

# RANCH ROMANCES

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1010

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION
*FIRST JANUARY NUMBER*

FEATURING

**RANDOM RIDER**
**by Walker A. Tompkins**

**TROUBLE IN WILD HORSE**
**by Teddy Keller**

Reducing Specialist Says:

# LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

# ELECTRIC Spot Reducer

## Spot Reducer

**Relaxing • Soothing Penetrating Massage**

UNDERWRITERS LABORATORY APPROVED

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**BODY MASSAGER CO., Dept. B-347**
**318 Market St., Newark, N. J.**

Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose $1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only $8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return **SPOT REDUCER** within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

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(No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name ..... Age .....

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City ..... Zone ... State .....

VETS write in date of discharge .....

32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

*FIRST JANUARY NUMBER*

December 30, 1955
Volume 195, No. 4

# RANCH ROMANCES

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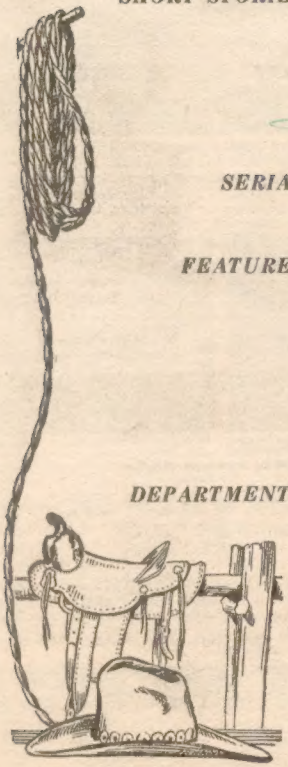

HELEN TONO
*Editor*

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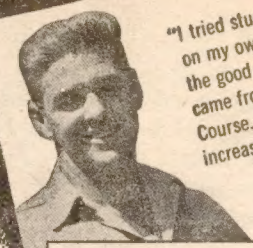
# ARE YOU TOO OLD TO LEARN?

*not at all, scientists say*



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City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to P.M._____

Occupation_____

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### Happy Housewife

Dear Editor:

I would like to correspond with ladies from 35 to 55 years of age. I am married and have two small children. My husband and I travel quite a bit. We also like to read and to watch television.

MRS. LUCILLE STRICKLAND
1521 W. Market Street
Louisville 3, Kentucky

### Young Married Miss

Dear Editor:

I love to write letters, and long ones at that. I'm 18 years old, 5'2" tall, with red hair and blue eyes. I have been married now for two years. I like outdoor sports, and dancing. Please let me hear from all of you.

MRS. BETTY STANDLEY
Gen. Del.
Fort Bragg, California

### Big Game Hunter

Dear Editor:

I am a man of 30, 6'1½" tall, weighing 166 lbs., with light brown hair and blue eyes. I have been in the wildest parts of Africa, and have hunted big game. I plan to make another expedition in the near future. I would like to write to girls between the ages of 18 and 30 years.

WILBERT W. NAPIER
Burlington, Kentucky
R.R. #1

### Second Attempt

Dear Editor:

This is my second try to get my letter printed in "Our Air Mail." I am 26 years old, 5'6" tall, weigh 168 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. I like all sports. So come on and write, everybody. I will answer all letters.

DON DOUGLAS
Rt. 2
Everson, Washington

### Young Widow

Dear Editor:

Here I am, trying to get into your column again, and I hope this time I succeed. I would like to have many pen pals. Will exchange snapshots, and answer all letters I receive. I am a widow, 28 years old. Please write to me.

MARY C. STEPHENS
c/o Gardners Beauty Shop
Jasper, Alabama

### Welcome to the Philippines

Dear Editor:

I am 26 years old, 5'3" tall, and weigh 135 lbs. My hobbies are movies, reading, letter writing, and photography. I will exchange stamps, magazines, snapshots and souvenirs. I shall be glad to correspond with anyone, especially young folks.

CIPRIANO M. DOCTOR
P. O. Box 11, Legaspi
Albay, Philippines

**EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.**

**Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.**

### Motherless Child

Dear Editor:

This is my second try at "Our Air Mail," and I hope I succeed. I really want and need pen pals. I don't have a mother, but live with my father and brother, and it gets awfully lonesome. I am 15 years old, 5'3" tall, with long brown hair and gray eyes. I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange photos.

LA VONNE CRAWFORD
P.O. Box 43
Bremerton, Washington

### Wants to Make Friends

Dear Editor:

I hope you will have enough space in your column to print my request for some young folks to correspond with. I am lonely and wish to make new friends. I am 6'4" tall, weigh 175 lbs., and am 19 years old.

PVT. CHARLES R. KRAMER
R A 22998902
C Btry 753 A A A Gun Bn.
A P O 919
c/o PM San Francisco, California

### The Wild Blue Yonder

Dear Editor:

I'm an extremely unlucky airman stationed in Korea, and would enjoy receiving mail from anyone who has a sense of humor. I am 27 years old, have brown hair and eyes, am 5'11" tall, and weigh 165 lbs. I really enjoy all sports, and love to write letters. Please help me get a fair idea of what it's like to get mail.

a/2c OTTO B. BURROUS A F 13218150
Diet 20, 30th Weather Sq. A P O 970
San Francisco, California

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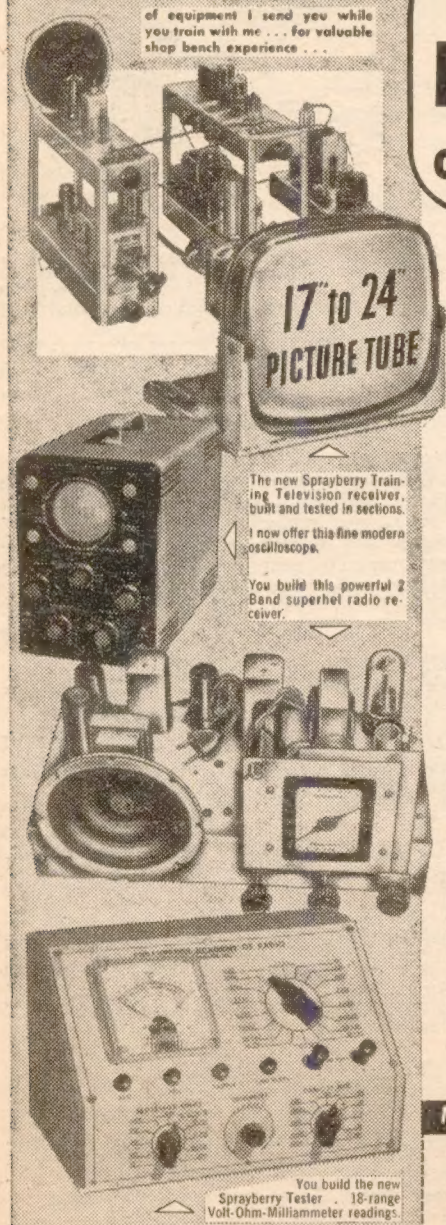
# "I Will Train You at Home in RADIO-TELEVISION on Liberal No Obligation Plan!"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Please rush all information on your ALL-NEW Radio-Television Training Plan. I understand this does not obligate me and that no *salesman will call* upon me. Include New Catalog and Sample Lesson FREE.

Name_____ Age____

Address_____

City_____ Zone____ State____

# TRAIL DUST

**PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!**

IT WAS a Chinese puzzle to the people of San Francisco, Calif., all right—the police announcement that said it would be okay to shoot off firecrackers to celebrate the Chinese New Year, but warned that anyone buying or selling fireworks would be arrested.

HANDING a cake to the judge who sentenced him to jail for traffic violations, a Coloma, Calif., man explained that, since he wouldn't be going home for a while, someone might as well enjoy the cake while it was fresh.

A LOS ANGELES, Calif., newspaper is being sued by a local politician for negligence in printing his ad. The candidate had wanted to say, "You need a friend in the city council," but the ad, as printed, omitted one letter and read, "You need a fiend in the city council."

CHARITY began at home for a Sherman, Tex., housewife, who gave some old clothes to a local welfare organization, then got the clothes back when she appealed for help after her home was destroyed by a storm.

A PRUDENT San Diego, Calif., girl took out liability insurance in case her dog bit anyone. The dog, insulted, promptly chewed up the insurance policy.

IT WAS no surprise to a Crockett, Tex., newspaperman's wife when her husband hastened to tip her off that a storm warning had been posted for the area. She had just been watching the wind blow away their barn and doghouse.

HE WAS too embarrassed even to tell the police—so an Oklahoma City, Okla., man ran the 24 blocks to his home to get an extra pair of pants before spreading the alarm for the thieves who had robbed him of his automobile, $9—and his pants.

"HOT as a boiler room" is an old cliche, but the Dixon, Ill., school board had to buy a heater to keep the boiler room pipes from freezing. The boilers are so well insulated the room got no heat.

CITIZENS of Roseville, Mich., don't complain to the village manager any more; he's found a way to silence them. To the oft-repeated remark, "I'm a taxpayer and I pay part of your salary," the official hands over a nickel and says, "This is your share; I'm giving it back."

A SAN FRANCISCO, Calif., man had a ready explanation for being arrested on a burglary charge despite the "crime does not pay" tattoed on his chest. "I had my shirt on at the time," he said.

SIGHING over the hard questions in a test, a Greenbush, Minn., schoolboy swallowed his pencil and had to go to a hospital to have it removed.

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# RANCH
## FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

*This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns*

# THE INDIAN FIGHTER

***Kirk Douglas follows his "Man Without a Star" success by playing another devil-may-care Western hero in United Artists' new movie***

THERE'S a new type of Western hero coming down the trail. He's not tight-lipped and serious. He's a man of many words, and he's not even tongue-tied in the presence of women. In fact, he greatly admires a pretty face, and you might catch him glancing at a pretty figure. He looks for all the world like Kirk Douglas.

Kirk introduced this devil-may-care, impudent fellow to Western fans in *Man Without a Star,* and there were those in Hollywood who predicted he wouldn't get away with it. A cowboy had to be polite and shy with the ladies, brave and daring with the villains, and practically never say anything except, "They went thataway."

But Kirk's version of a cowboy turned out to be a great success, and so did his last Western. So here he is in a new one, *The Indian Fighter,* soon to be released by United Artists.

It's the story of a man who calls himself an Indian fighter and guides wagon trains through dangerous territory. Actually, though, Johnny Hawks much prefers to make the country safe by establishing peace with the Indians than by killing them.

There's a cast of veterans, the capable stand-bys who turn in good performances regularly, like Walter Matthau, Walter Abel, and Ray Teal, as well as three others who also qualify as movie veterans, though they all put "Jr." after their names—Lon Chaney, Alan Hale and Elisha Cook.

Most of the interest, though, is centered on a newcomer, lovely Elsa Martinelli, who steps right into stardom in her first Hollywood role as the Indian maiden, Onahti. Also in the cast is Diana Douglas, Kirk's ex-wife, playing a young widow heading West in the wagon train, with marriage on her mind. But in the movie she and Kirk end up just friends, as they are in life.

*The Indian Fighter* was filmed in Cinemascope near Bend, Oregon, one of the most popular movie locations because of its beautiful Cascade Mountains, its tumbling, rushing rivers, and its deep, unspoiled forests. But when scouts were looking over the area to decide whether to film the movie there, they found one thing missing—a fort.

The Bend Chamber of Commerce offered to

remedy this lack, hoping to lure more movie companies as well as more summer tourists, to their town. So the fort wasn't hastily thrown up; it was built to last.

It is 200 feet square, with walls 20 feet high, and it took 5,000 lodge pole pines to build it, plus another 3,000 to construct the buildings inside the fort. It's four times as big as the one Lewis and Clark built in that part of the country, when they explored the Northwest, and the early pioneers would have considered it a settlement of sheer luxury, with its settlers' store, headquarters office, troops' and officers' quarters, horse barn with 44 stalls, hay storage barn, jail, blacksmith shop, water reservoir, powder magazine and blockhouse.

Everything in it is as authentic as possible, and everything works. Kirk was delighted with it, and allowed as how the folks of Bend could hole up there for quite a spell if they ever got mad at the rest of the country.

Indians, naturally, play a big part in *The Indian Fighter*. About 250 of them were delighted to join the cast, though they explained they were doing it for fun, not for money. The Piutes, Wascos and Yakimas are proud of the fact that they're very nicely fixed financially, thank you, from their mineral and fishing rights.

They also, luckily, have special hunting rights. There is one banquet scene in the movie, which for authenticity needed six freshly-killed deer. But the hunting season in Oregon was over, and the director was puzzled about how to get his venison. Then the Indians came to the rescue. Since there's no closed season for Indians, they shot the deer, the director got his scene, and the Indians really had a banquet.

Besides the Indians, there were 200 Oregonians in the cast, and 118 actors and technicians who came from Hollywood, a thousand miles away. Newcomer Elsa Martinelli was round-eyed at the size of the production, and even the old-timers were impressed.

Kirk was delighted with the whole thing. As he said to me, "When you make a picture about the wide-open spaces of the Old West, it's got to be big."

***Kirk Douglas wrestles a knife away from "Indian" Elsa Martinelli***

# ADELLE AUGUST
## A Bright New Face

RANCH FLICKER TALK

THE BRIGHTEST, newest face on the Western scene belongs to Adelle August. It's about the happiest face, too, ever since Adelle finished Columbia's *Apache Ambush,* her latest picture.

In it she plays her first leading role, which is enough to make any budding actress pretty pleased. But on top of that, Adelle made the grade to stardom in record time. She made only four pictures before *Apache Ambush.*

"I had expected a long string of bit parts before I'd get a lead in even a short subject," Adelle told me. "But if I've skipped a few steps up the ladder, I don't mind one bit. I've become so used to the idea now that I've almost stopped pinching myself—but not quite!"

When Adelle was younger, she thought she might become a nurse. But before she made up her mind, she entered a beauty contest. From then on it was obvious that she had more and different attributes than a nurse needs. She had a dimple, for one thing, and Adelle says that she owes her career to it.

"Every time I won an award in a beauty contest the judge would comment on the dimple. The more they commented, the more I smiled, and the deeper it grew. It got to be quite a circle of events—and here I am!"

Of course Adelle neglects to mention that she can act, too, which is even more important. When she had won more silver cups than she had room for, Adelle left her native Seattle for Hollywood. But the doors seldom open like magic, and there was a period of eating money jobs before the break came.

"I was teaching ballroom dancing in a Hollywood dance studio when I had a slight brush with fame," Adelle remembers. "I got a chance to read for the part of May Wynn in *The Caine Mutiny.* There must have been a hundred unknowns like me trying out, and of course I didn't make it. But at least nobody suggested that I go back to Seattle, so I kept trying."

Next on the August agenda came a trip to Las Vegas, where Adelle's sister was dancing in the chorus of a nightclub. In no time, so was Adelle—without even trying out for a job.

She stayed for nine months, and was beginning to wonder if she were putting down roots in Las Vegas for good, when a Columbia executive spotted her. After that things began to happen fast. They haven't stopped happening yet.

Now that she's a full-fledged actress, Adelle has an apartment in Hollywood which she shares with another girl. It's quite a household. Madame Butterfly and Buddha live there as well, but being Siamese cats, they don't take up much room. There is still plenty of space for informal dinner parties—prepared by Adelle and guaranteed to upset anybody's diet. Adelle, who has never had to watch calories herself, likes to fix exotic dishes almost as much as she enjoys eating them.

Adelle is an unusual combination of many talents. When it comes to hobbies, she has more than she can find time for. For a while, decorating her apartment took most of her spare time. But now, if she's not puttering in the kitchen, she is apt to be out playing tennis, playing golf, or swimming—all of which she does well.

"You might call me sort of an indoor-outdoor girl," Adelle says.

As for her career, that comes first. There is a generous sprinkling of ambition in Adelle's personality, and part of it is directed toward the stage.

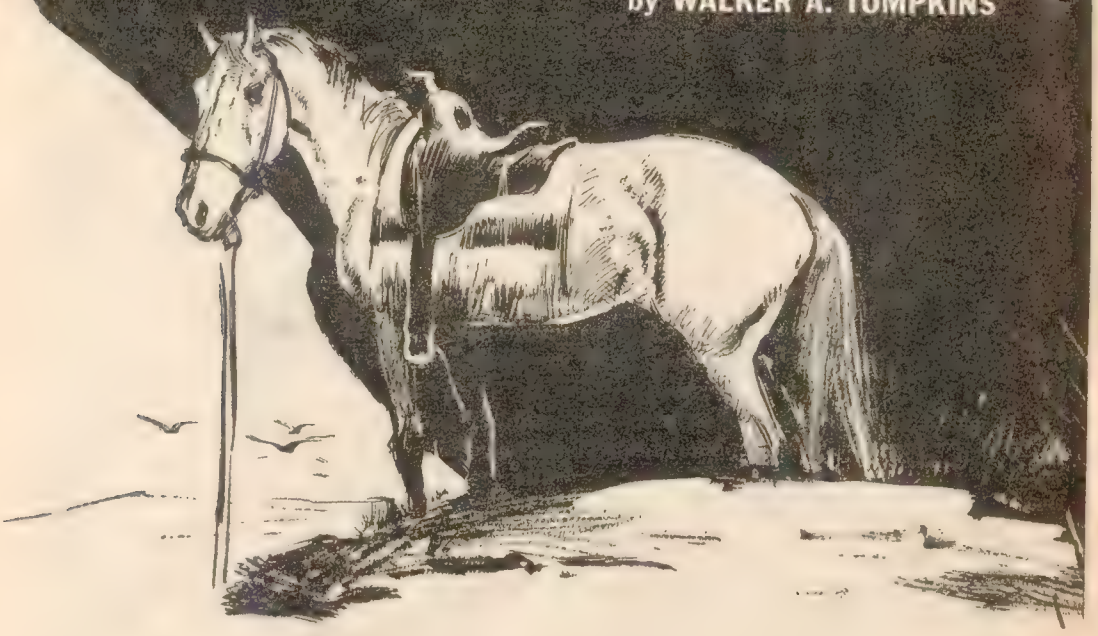
I'm sure she'll make it, too. For a girl barely eligible to vote, she's gone a long way already.

*Columbia*

***Adelle is just getting used to the idea of her sudden stardom***

# RANDOM RIDER

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS



SHE let the blue roan have its head, knowing the reins might transmit to the horse the strained terror she was feeling. This Ladder Ledge trail cut twenty miles off the trip from Box J to Los Alamos, compared to the wagon road down Arrowhead Canyon. Besides, with a rainstorm gathering over the Mogollon country, she knew the bridges could be wiped out if a flash flood struck the valley. At least the Ladder, sloping like a yard-wide shelf down the face of the cliffs, could not be destroyed by any storm.

"Only a fool, or an outlaw dodging a posse, would risk his neck on Ladder Ledge," Beth Jarrod's father had said often during her growing-up years, seeking to discourage her from tackling the trail on one of her day-long horseback rides around Box J. Old Larrabee Jarrod was tough as they came, but even he had only tried the Ladder once—that night, eighteen summers ago, when his wife had died bringing Beth into the world.

Only in desperation would Beth have put the blue roan down

*THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER had saved Beth's life, and it would be easy to love him . . . much easier than it was to trust his motives*

this short cut; but she *was* desperate. She had to reach town today to see Todd Corley about a loan, in order to beat the bank's deadline tomorrow and the arrival of the Apache Land & Cattle Company's big trail herd the day after that. Range baron Tom Jeffreys intended to summer graze those cattle on Box J range.

She tried not to look at the thousand-foot drop-off on her right; she tried to keep her thoughts on what she would say to Todd Corley when she got to town. She had to make Todd see it her way. Box J would be lost to Jeffreys's combine if she couldn't get that loan.

And then the blue roan shied—why, she would never know. Perhaps the horse had scented a diamondback rattler on the trailside, or had been spooked by the sweep of a buzzard's shadow running down the cliff. All Beth knew for sure was that the big gelding suddenly swapped ends on the three-foot-wide rock shelf, and a buckle tongue in her saddle cinch gave way the instant the horse lost its footing.

She had a blurred glimpse of blue Arizona sky as they went over the edge, with a fifth of a mile of nothingness below her. Then she was crashing into an out-jutting, half-dead loblolly pine that had taken precarious root in a dirt-filled fissue below the Ladder. She heard the tree snap like a pistol shot and split down the middle.

But the sagging pine did not break asunder and fall free; it absorbed the momentum of the girl's plummeting body. Then she was slamming hard against the cliff's surface, the tree trunk pinning her legs to the rock, holding her.

She felt the saddle stirrups slide off her boots, as her arms clawed for and wrapped around the tree trunk. She opened her eyes in time to catch a glimpse of the plummeting saddle, dwindling in slow motion far below her.

Then Beth Jarrod saw another object hurtling earthward. She squeezed her eyes shut again, having recognized that speck as her horse. Long afterward, it seemed—although the interval was measured in seconds—she heard the rending crash of undergrowth as the big roan hit the floor of Arrowhead Canyon.

Then there was silence again, and Beth opened her eyes to take stock of her situation. She was hanging head down, her body pinned to almost vertical rock by the weight of the broken tree trunk she had struck on the way down. The miracle of her escape brought thanksgiving to her, and then horror. Perhaps, one corner of her mind kept telling her, the horse was luckier than she; it had died instantly. Beth might be faced with an infinitely worse death from exposure or starvation.

For she was trapped. She got a grip on the pine log and managed to pull herself horizontal, but the weight of the tree lay across her legs and she knew she could never extricate herself, without help, from this nightmare. And there would be no help.

Sweat oozed from the girl's brow, dimming her vision as her eyes traveled along the fractured, split-open tree trunk to the spot near the roots where the impact of her tumble had broken it. Even if she could get free to shinny up that hanging pine trunk, there was fifteen feet of overhanging, glass-smooth rock between her and the Ladder Ledge trail.

Nor could she hug the out-jutting tree trunk for more than a few minutes at a time without letting go. Yet resting while hanging head downward over hundreds of feet of empty air was an intolerable prospect.

Beth's years on Box J, growing up without the companionship of people her own age, had taught her self-reliance. She reasoned out how to support herself without wasting the strength in her arms—by slipping the belt from her bibless levis, slinging it around the six-inch tree trunk, fastening the buckle, and using the loop thus formed as a cradle to support her head.

Her chances of survival were small, and Beth Jarrod accepted the truth stoically. No one ever used the Ladder Ledge trail, unless you counted an occasional random rider.

WHEN she had left the home ranch this morning, after convincing her father that an appeal to Todd Corley in Los Alamos was the only possible way of keeping Box J out of Tom Jeffreys's hands,

she had told old Larrabee not to expect her home for at least a week. It was a long way down to Los Alamos, and she hadn't seen any of her old friends there in more than a year.

So she couldn't expect help from her father. When she didn't get back from Los Alamos after the week had elapsed, he might get worried and send Pedro, the roustabout, down the valley road to investigate. Her father himself wouldn't come; he was bedridden, recuperating from the bushwhack bullet that had smashed his hip bone a month ago.

Unless Pedro happened to look upward at the Mogollon wall and see carrion birds wheeling around a tiny object suspended on this protruding pine, no one would ever know what happened.

Tom Jeffreys's conspiracy with the bank, to foreclose on Box J and force the Jarrods off their home spread, was going to succeed. That despairing fact rode more heavily on Beth's mind now, in these first few minutes of her extremity, than the slow death she herself faced.

She twisted her head in the leather sling to pick out the ribbon of wagon road in the canyon below, wondering if some passing rider might spot the carcass of her blue roan. But even that chance was denied her. The horse was coyote bait now, lost in thick timber a good hundred yards off the road.

She remembered the gun her father had insisted she wear "in case you spot a rattlesnake or a timber wolf on the way down." Larrabee Jarrod himself couldn't make the trip to town, but he didn't want his daughter traveling, unarmed, through country that was a favorite hideout for wanted men.

But the bone-handled Colt wasn't in the open holster at her thigh; it had slipped free during her head-over-heels tumble. Despair shot through the girl at that discovery. A gunshot could attract the attention of any passing rider she might spot on the valley road. Her brain refused to dwell on the other last-resort use for which she could have used a gun.

Except for the pain in her pinioned legs, Beth didn't think she had sustained any injury in the mishap. But the belt was beginning to cut into the nape of her neck, despite the cushioning chignon of her glossy black hair. She eyed the sun, already about to touch the summit above Box J's mile-high bench. With the coming of night, strong winds would whip along this cliff wall, and she was wearing only a workshirt and levis; her riding coat had been tied behind the cantle.

She reached for the tree trunk again, dead bark shearing off like soggy cardboard under the pressure of her clawing fingers. She didn't dare sway her body in the hope of moving the tree off her legs, for to do so might snap off the broken shaft of the loblolly which was joined to the roots.

She closed her eyes, unable to face the slow departure of day's light from the sky overhead. She was like that, trying to blank her mind of all thought, when the drawling voice roused her out of her dull stupor.

"Enjoying the view down there, young lady?"

A cry escaped Beth's lips. Opening her eyes, she saw a tall, range-clad man hunkered down on the rim of the Ladder, twenty feet overhead.

She glimpsed the head of a buckskin saddle horse, nostrils flaring nervously, behind the man on the ledge.

He was shaking out the loops of a pleated rawhide rope. Obviously he had been ascending the Ladder Ledge trail, perhaps had seen the accident; she could tell by the noisy breathing of the buckskin that it had been pushed up the steep trail at top speed.

"Please help me out of this."

Her own voice sounded strange in her ears, echoing back from the basalt wall. She saw the man get to his feet, and knew by the movements of his shoulders that he was dallying one end of the lariat to his saddle horn, out of range of her sight.

A moment later he was paying the rope down the cliff wall, length by length, swinging the hondo end out away from the tree.

"Get the loop under your armpits," the rider called down, when her out-snatching hand gripped the noose of the reata. "I'm going to have to crawl down far enough to get that tree off your legs."

She wriggled her head out of the loop of her belt and, drawing strength from the taut

solidity of the dangling rope, worked the loop open and tugged it over her head and shoulders. She felt the rider draw it tight around her armpits, dallying the slack around the saddle horn of the now invisible horse up on the ledge.

CLINGING to the rope with both hands, Beth Jarrod gave her fascinated attention to this man who had come, like an answer to prayer. He was young, she saw, around twenty-five, with a clean-chiseled face showing the blue stain of a day-old beard.

He wore the nondescript garb of a working cowhand—hickory shirt, flare-winged bullhide chaps, and spurred Coffeyville boots with Texas stars stitched in the kangaroo leather. Double gun belts, bristling with cartridges, looped his lean middle; the stocks of stag-horn-handled Army .45s jutted from tied-down holsters at either flank. She found herself wondering if he were a gunman.

"Don't worry about the rope holding, ma'am," he called down to her, beginning his hand-over-hand descent. "It's held more'n

one thousand-pound steer in its time, and you and I together don't weigh half that, do we?"

"Not," she quavered, in a feeble attempt at levity, "unless you weigh close to four hundred pounds."

His boots were touching the outcrop of stone now, a few feet above her. He paused, eyes slitting thoughtfully as he sized up the broken tree, the angle of the bole hanging down to pin her thighs against the stone.

"You hurt?" he asked finally. "Any bones busted? The reason I'm asking is that I've got to figure some way to cut this tree loose so it'll drop free. Then the rope'll catch you. Make dead sure your elbows are below the loop when you fall away."

She felt, for the first time, the dull throbbing agony of bruised flesh in her upper legs.

"I don't think I broke any bones," she said. "You see, my horse shied—"

"I know," he cut in gruffly. "I saw you riding down. A person's a fool for risking the Ladder on horseback. I was leading my bronc until I saw you go over the side. You used up the luck of a lifetime, lady."

She saw him get a firm grip on the rope and lean back, kicking at the broken splints of the loblolly. The vibration of the tree against her trapped legs sent shivers of pain deep to the core of her, making her wonder if she were hurt worse than she knew, if she were in shock and didn't know it.

"Hang tight, now!"

The rider's yell was punctuated by the loud snapping and rending of the loblolly as its heavier portion began opening the long crack in the trunk.

The heavy pressure eased off on Beth's thighs and she felt herself dropping free as the dead pine snapped asunder, the lower end whipping out like a broken spring, the shaggy branches of the upper end whistling through space as the main section of the tree dropped earthward.

She was swinging like a pendulum now, legs dangling over empty space. Above her, the rider was bracing his legs against the cliffs face, calling softly to the horse overhead, on whom both their lives now depended. If that buckskin bolted as her roan had done . . . if the rope frayed from the abrasion of the flinty rimrock. . . .

He began climbing now, with powerful hand-over-hand pulls of his dangling weight. She saw him get a grip on the ledge rim and hoist himself up on solid rock. Panic went through her momentarily when he disappeared from view, the panic that this whole thing might be a figment of her imagination, that she was already delirious.

Then she saw his face again, bathed with sweat in the coppery glow of the sunset. He was wedging one boot toe between the rope and the brink of the ledge, and starting to pull her upward, using the smooth leather of his boot to keep the reata from scraping on the rough stone.

An eternity later, it seemed, his strong, rope-calloused hands were gripping her armpits, boots braced for leverage on the shelving ledge. Then she was up and over the brink and sagging to her knees, clinging to his batwing chaps as if fearful she would lose her balance and fall back into the hellish chasm behind her.

"Nothing to worry about now, lady," the rich masculine voice was reassuring her, as her benefactor pulled her back to a sitting position against the cliff.

He was coiling up the rope and returning it to the buckskin's saddle horn. She felt dizzy, almost sick to the stomach, and her legs failed to respond to her efforts to stand up. And then he was unscrewing the cap of a saddle canteen and holding it to her lips gently yet firmly.

He let her drink sparingly, knowing what too much cold creek water could do to a girl in her shaky condition. His eyes traveled over her with frank admiration, approving what he saw.

At eighteen, Beth Jarrod was in the full bloom of mature womanhood, with the suntanned complexion and blue eyes to complement her ebon-black hair. For this horseback trip she had donned a man's shirt and levis, but the severe austerity of her garb could not minimize the lush feminity, the voluptuous curves.

"I've never seen you in these parts before," Beth said, as the man fished makings from his shirt pocket and began twisting a smoke. "Yet you know this ledge is called the Ladder. Are you from Los Alamos?"

HE TAPERED and licked the cigarette, his hazel-green eyes searching her face thoughtfully. "I hit Los Alamos last night for the first time in my life," he said, firing up his smoke. "What's your name, señorita? What were *you* doing, coming down a cliff trail that would frighten a fly?"

She felt her cheeks flame before his boldly admiring glance, and a shiver of apprehension touched her. She was wholly at his mercy, she realized that; she had no way of knowing what sort of depraved outlaw he might be. Who else but a man on the dodge would have been climbing the Ladder Ledge?

"My name's Beth."

"A nice name. Short for Elizabeth?"

"Bethia, Bethia Jarrod. I was named for my mother."

A startled expression crossed the man's lean, wind-beaten face. "Jarrod," he repeated, as if to himself. "Then it's your old man who runs timber cattle up on the high bench. I might have known."

Surprise narrowed her eye You say you're a stranger in this part of the Territory. Yet you know my ranch brand?"

He shrugged. Box J's the only ranch in upper Arrowhead Canyon, isn't it? And I got plenty of warning down in Los Alamos that a man took his life in his hands, approaching Larrabee Jarrod's spread by the lower road. That's why I took this Ladder cut-off."

"You were warned away from Box J?"

His grin deepened the laugh wrinkles around his mouth as he said, "Down in town, I gathered your father's sworn he'd shoot first and ask questions afterward of any stranger heading up the lower road. And I wanted to get across the mountains."

She had no comeback for that, remembering her father's explosive temper, the intemperant threats he had made to fight off the expected invaders of his spread. But old Larrabee wouldn't actually stoop to murder; that was wild talk.

"I owe my life to your believing the wild gossip about my father," she said, laughing. "I'd given myself up for a goner." Suddenly she thought of something that had been nagging the back of her mind for several minutes. "You haven't told me your name."

His expression altered, became suddenly bleak and indrawn. He came to his feet and held out his hands to her. "The name? They call me Slim. Let's see how badly those legs were hurt. Can you stand up?"

She accepted his hands and came unsteadily to her feet, but her knees seemed to be made of rubber and she would have fallen if he hadn't put one arm around her waist. There was nothing forward in his action or manner; she felt grateful for the strength of his supporting arms.

"Thank you, Slim. I feel so—so terribly weak."

But she wasn't thinking about her own terrifying weakness, or the pain that lanced up from her bruised legs. She was repeating over and over to herself the evasive nickname he had given her. He wasn't offering his full name, or telling her anything about himself—nothing to account for his showing up on the Ladder Ledge, miles from nowhere.

That was what an outlaw would do—hedge about identifying himself. Maybe he was afraid she had seen his name on a reward poster somewhere.

"How far back is it," he asked suddenly, "to Box J?"

Beth Jarrod knew it was useless to lie to this man, tell him they were only a short distance from her father's spread. He had only to look at the long, upward sweep of the Ladder to know they were a long way down the ledge.

"It's ten miles. But I can't go back. I've got to get to Los Alamos. I can make it the rest of the way on foot."

Slim shook his head at her suggestion. "Impossible, with night coming on. The ledge is too narrow even to turn the buckskin around and give you a lift back down to level ground."

When she did not answer, Slim went on, "That break in the cliffs yonder is Obsidian Gulch, isn't it?"

She nodded, glancing back at the yawning maw of the side canyon which she had passed a couple of hundred yards back. Arrowhead Creek headed up that gulch, flowing across the Ladder and dropping in a gauzy horsetail waterfall to the main canyon below.

"I was told in town," Slim continued, "that there's an abandoned prospector's shack just

off the Ladder trail, inside Obsidian. It would be shelter for the night."

Beth Jarrod shook her head violently, clinging to this man for support, a wild helplessness sweeping through her. "I told you I've got to go on. I've got to get to town. It's a matter of life or death."

Slim reached for the buckskin's trailing bridle reins. "It'll be pitch dark in another hour," he reminded her. "Even if you were in shape to walk, you couldn't make it down the ledge. There are places down there where rockslides have nearly wiped out the trail. Old Buck here had to make like a bighorn sheep to keep climbing."

She knew he was speaking the truth. Without a lantern to guide her, she could never make it down to the head of the main Arrowhead Canyon. He led the buckskin up beside her. Before she knew what was happening, Slim had scooped her off her feet and was hoisting her astride his saddle.

"We'll turn in at Obsidian," Slim was saying as he started leading Buck up the Ladder, "and cook something to eat from whatever I can rustle out of my grubsack." He cocked an eye at the ominous-looking stormclouds racking for miles along the Mogollon rim to eastward. "Probably in for a humdinger of a thunderstorm before the night's over. I hope that prospector's shanty has a stout roof."

A tremor went through Beth Jarrod, whether of fear or anticipation she did not know. She had visited the old prospector's place in Obsidian Gulch more than once while she was growing up. A more lonely spot it would be difficult to imagine. She thought of her father, bedridden back at the Box J, and wondered what he would think if he knew his daughter was faced with the prospect of spending the night alone with a total stranger, probably an outlaw at that, at old Benj Crawford's mining claim cabin.

THE leaden storm clouds were blotting out the sunset glow, bringing on premature dusk as they came to the broad area of shallow running water where the creek sluiced over the Ladder above Horsetail Falls.

Slim was picking his way carefully across that wet streak, the icy flow surging up ankle deep to his Coffeyvilles as he led the buckskin at right angles into the rock-hemmed mouth of Obsidian Gulch.

What was left of daylight put a strange, eerie shimmer on the fluted scarps of volcanic glass which had given the side canyon its name. Arrowhead Creek made an organ tone, brawling over its steep rocky bed. Slim was leading the buckskin up the narrow trail which bordered the stream.

Remote in the distance came the long roll of thunder. Flickers of lightning zigzagged along the higher Mogollon peaks, above Box J. As Slim had predicted, they were probably in for a stormy night of it.

Then she saw the hazy outlines of old Benj Crawford's shack up ahead, just this side of the sprawl of mine tailings where the desert rat had dug a prospect hole.

The rock cabin had a roof, she remembered, but it had fallen into disrepair during the years that had elapsed since her last excursion to this place. Glass was gone from the cabin windows. Winter gales had ripped shakes off the roof, exposing bald patches where the pole rafters showed through, like bleached ribs. The massive rock-and-mud fireplace chimney loomed up against the background of the cliffs like some sort of gravestone.

"Beggars can't be choosers," Slim said, halting the horse in front of the sagging slab door of the prospector's hut. "Plenty of firewood around, anyway, and we ought to find a dry corner someplace when the rain sets in in earnest."

He was holding up his arms to her, waiting for her to slide from the stirrups. The girl swallowed hard, trying not to let this man know her stomach was knotted with fear.

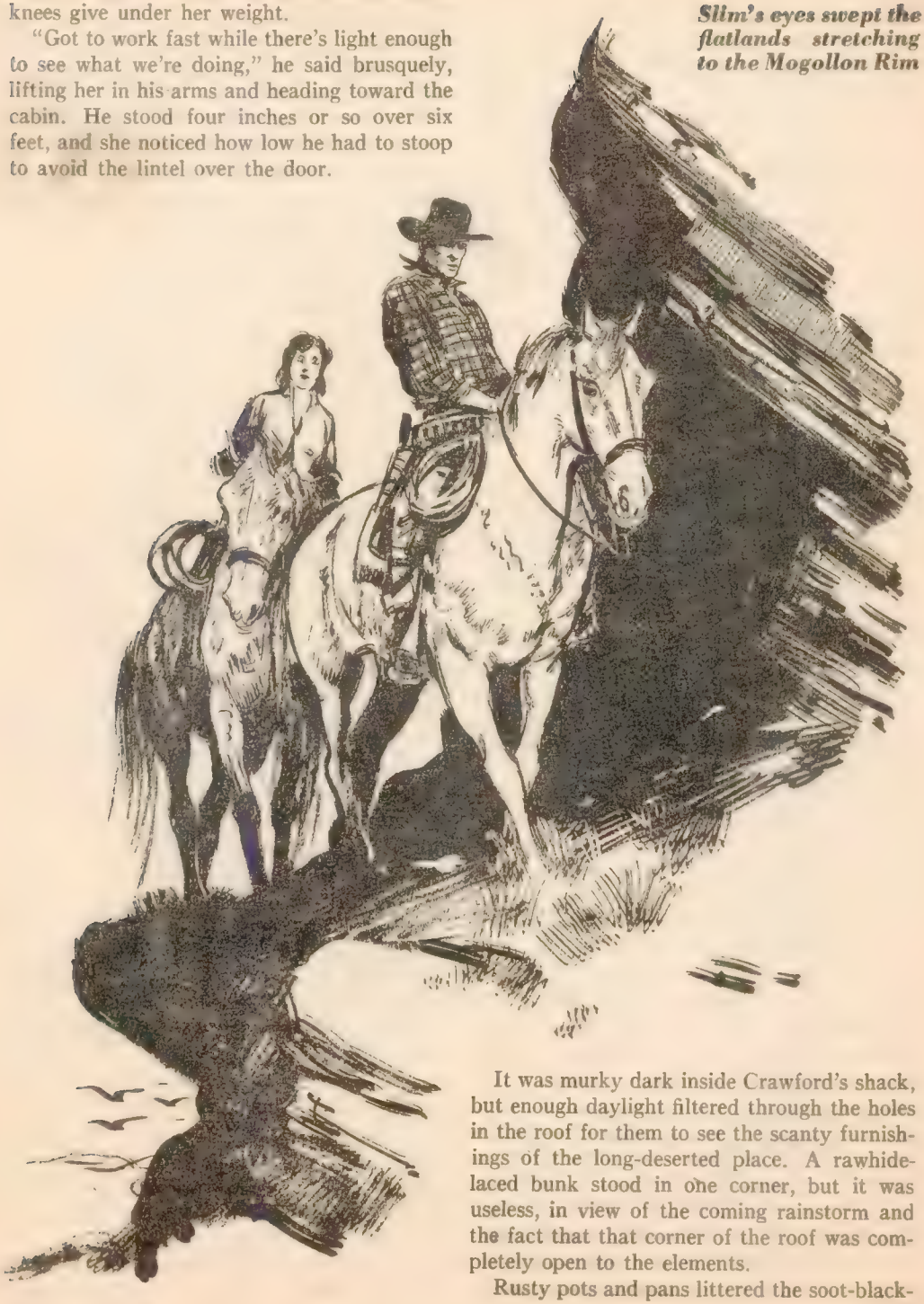
"Couldn't you please let me borrow your horse to get to town?" she begged the stranger. "He's sure-footed, and horses can travel in the dark."

Slim shook his head. "You'd have to lead him past the narrow spots—old Buck's got too much sense to carry a rider over the ground he came up this afternoon. Besides, Buck's a one-man horse. He won't let anyone else fork him unless I'm around to lead him. Come on, climb down."

It was sheer agony, swinging her left leg over the cantle. She half fell, trying to dismount, and he caught her and swung her eas-

ily to the ground. Once again she felt her knees give under her weight.

"Got to work fast while there's light enough to see what we're doing," he said brusquely, lifting her in his arms and heading toward the cabin. He stood four inches or so over six feet, and she noticed how low he had to stoop to avoid the lintel over the door.



***Slim's eyes swept the flatlands stretching to the Mogollon Rim***

It was murky dark inside Crawford's shack, but enough daylight filtered through the holes in the roof for them to see the scanty furnishings of the long-deserted place. A rawhide-laced bunk stood in one corner, but it was useless, in view of the coming rainstorm and the fact that that corner of the roof was completely open to the elements.

Rusty pots and pans littered the soot-black-

ened fireplace hearth. There was a deal table, lying on its side in the middle of the shack, and the floor was littered with old magazines and playing cards and other debris, scattered by packrats and the winds of the fifteen winters that had elapsed since its owner had set out for town, never to return.

The stranger carried Beth over to the bunk and set her down gently. Then, hitching his gun belts, he let his gaze rake the gloomy interior of the shack, and spotted a rusty lantern with a blackened chimney hanging from a nail on a ceiling beam.

He lifted down the lantern, shook it, and heard coal oil sloshing in the fuel tank. He jacked up the chimney and put a match to the wick. The lantern shed a feeble yellow glare, bringing the details of the cabin into sharper focus.

"You just sit tight," Slim said, "while I see to stabling old Buck and fetching in my bedroll and grubsack. We'll be comfortable, even if it does storm."

A heavy roll of thunder blotted out the girl's answer. Slim disappeared outdoors, after righting the deal table and setting the lantern on it. Beth propped herself up on one elbow and started massaging her bruised thighs. She moved her toes and ankles experimentally. There were no bones broken. All she needed was rest.

SOMETHING in motion, down on the dirt floor, drew the girl's eyes in that direction. She stared fixedly at the movement that had startled her, recognizing it as a tiny wisp of smoke from a cigarette butt lying on the floor, crushed flat by a bootheel, but not enough to extinguish a particle of glowing red tobacco. Even as she stared, the spark went out, the smoke vanished.

She thought in sudden horror, "Slim wasn't smoking when he carried me in here. That cigarette must have belonged to someone else, someone who was in this cabin when we rode up."

Pure terror went through her, as she remembered all the rumors she had heard of outlaws using the old Crawford shack as a hideout, on occasion. Or had Slim had this place as his destination while he was coming up the Ladder Ledge? Was he keeping a rendezvous with some other hunted man here?

She could hear Slim stabling his horse in the lean-to out back. A warm spatter of rain sifted through the open roof over the bunk, puffing trail dust from her shirt.

She started violently as the back door of the shanty opened and Slim stepped into the soft glow of lantern light. He was carrying a gunnsack and blanket roll. There was nothing in his manner to indicate that he had seen anyone else on the premises.

Sizing up the ten-foot-square room, Slim gestured toward the trash-littered corner diagonally opposite the bunk.

"I'll spread the soogans for you yonder, where it'll be dry. We're in for a soaking tonight, I'm afraid."

Beth's hopes leaped at the man's use of the singular pronoun in discussing their sleeping arrangements. Till now, Slim had conducted himself with absolute propriety. But even so, she could not bring herself to tell him about the strange bootprint and the still-smouldering cigarette she had discovered.

"Still wobbly?" he inquired, dumping the grubsack on the table. "Just take it easy while I rustle up some dry firewood for us."

Slim tossed the bedroll into the corner and went out through the front door. The rain was gusting down now, presaging the violence of the night storm to come.

Beth forced herself to her feet and limped over to the door connecting with the stable shed. Opening it, she was greeted by a dazzling green burst of forked lightning, which made the canyon above Crawford's claim momentarily as bright as noonday.

Moving out of sight around the sprawl of mine tailings was a slicker-clad man, leading a saddle horse. And, plain in the rain-dappled dust leading out of the stable where Slim had just bedded down his horse, was a fresh set of hoofprints. Whoever the man in the slicker was, his horse had occupied the shed when Slim had entered it a few moments before.

Beth made no mention of her disquieting discovery when Slim came back inside and dumped a heavy armload of dry wood on the floor. Shaving kindling with a stock knife, Slim got a fire going in the big rock hearth.

With the fire going to suit him, Slim shifted the deal table to a comparatively dry corner

near the fireplace. Then he fished some bags from his grubsack, put coffee in a pot, and hung it on a hook of the rusty iron fireplace crane, where it would come to a boil in the leaping flames.

Slim had made no effort to engage the girl in conversation; he kept up a tuneless whistling to himself. She found herself admiring his effortless efficiency, the utter lack of lost motion in the way he went about slicing potatoes and sowbelly into the skillet he carried with him. The aroma of coffee reached Beth's nostrils above the over-all dankness and mustiness of the shack.

The only chair in the place was a wreck, but Slim located a powder box which had been nailed to the wall to serve as a cupboard, and placed it alongside the table. Then he hunkered down in front of the fireplace, added more wood, and began rocking the skillet over the flames.

The firm angle of his jaw was covered with a day's growth of stubble, and he was grimy with trail dust. But, with a shave and a good washing, Beth thought, he would be downright handsome.

"How'd you happen to be riding over the rim, Slim?" she finally asked.

He glanced up at her from where he was stirring the spuds and bacon with a fork. "I wasn't looking for work at your father's ranch," he said, grinning, "despite the fact I was told in town that Larrabee Jarrod might be in the market for some paid gunhands."

Beth looked up, indignation flaring in her eyes.

"That's not true!" she burst out. "Dad stomps his own snakes. He doesn't hire gunhawks to fight his battles."

Slim's brows arched. "So?" he echoed skeptically. "Down in Los Alamos this morning, I was given to understand that the Apache Land & Cattle Company is moving in on Box J, aiming to take it away from your father, and that he'd served warning he'd die fighting for his spread. A man in a jam like that, fighting a combine as big as A.L. & C., usually has to hire some help."

Beth pulled in a heavy breath. "It's true," she admitted, "that Apache aims to use Box J for summer graze. Maybe Dad did some blustering in town, saying he'd defend the place with guns. But he didn't mean it. Dad doesn't fight that way—especially when Apache is within its rights in moving us out."

Slim set the steaming skillet aside and headed back to the table, setting out a tin plate, cup and pie tin.

"I'm a mite low on dishes," he said, "but we can make out. Come and get it."

BETH tried to restrain her eagerness, getting over to the powder box which Slim offered her in lieu of a chair. Her mouth watered with anticipation while he dished out a generous helping of golden brown potato wafers and crisp bacon on the tin plate. He used the pie tin for his own share.

A rusty tin can served as a coffee cup for the rider; the tin cup, filled to the brim, he placed at Beth's plate. The grubsack produced a tin box of sugar and a can of condensed milk.

Squatting down at the opposite side of the table, the firelight limning his face with bronze and copper, Slim pitched into his food with a tired man's hearty appetite.

"You say this Apache combine owns Box J?" he asked finally.

"It will, day after tomorrow," she said bitterly. "You see, Dad over-extended himself last year, putting in an irrigation system for alfalfa. He got himself in debt at the Stockman's Bank in town, figuring he could pay up after we sold our beef last fall. But—"

At the break in her voice, Slim looked up curiously. "But drought hit the bench? The beef was only good for hides and tallow?"

She shook her head. "Rustlers cleaned Dad out overnight. And as if that weren't bad enough, only three weeks ago a drygulcher put a slug in Dad's leg, and laid him up. That's why I was heading for town, instead of him."

Slim said harshly, "Who rustled your stock? Who tried to bushwhack your father?"

"Who else but Tom Jeffreys's Apache Land & Cattle Company? Jeffreys is the one who stands to benefit most by grabbing Box J."

Slim was silent for a long interval. Finally he said, as if to himself, "I worked for Apache a few years back, down on the Gila. I didn't know the syndicate operated owlhoot style."

Beth lowered her coffee cup to peer at him

intently. "Then you've met Apache's boss, old Tom Jeffreys. You should know what a completely ruthless old sinner he is."

Slim shook his head. "Jeffreys is an important citizen of the Territory, a former senator, president of the Protective. I can't believe he'd stoop to rustling and ambush."

Beth Jarrod said, "We can't prove Apache was behind our trouble. But Jeffreys is utterly merciless when it comes to freezing out small spreads. That's why his syndicate is expanding, why Jeffreys is a cattle king. He's sent agents out to Box J more than once, wanting to buy Dad out, wanting our range for summer graze. When Dad wouldn't sell, he called in his gun dogs."

Slim, profoundly disturbed, began shaping himself a smoke. Outside, the rain had settled down to a steady pattering on the roof. Mud puddles were beginning to form on the littered floor.

"I begin to get the picture," Slim said thoughtfully, his eyes on his cigarette making. "Your Dad's paper at the bank is due the day after tomorrow. Tom Jeffreys heard about it and knew he had your father in a bind. Apache Land & Cattle offered the bank enough to pay off your Dad's indebtedness."

She nodded, tears suddenly filling her eyes. "That's the way it stacks up, Slim. It's an old story where Jeffreys is concerned. One way or another, he's been buying up the small ranches all over Tonto Basin, up and down the Mogollon Rim country."

Slim walked over to the fireplace, fished out a blazing sliver of wood and lit his smoke. Without facing her, he said, "What do you mean, one way or another?"

"I mean, Jeffreys takes his land legally—or by force. In our case, it's a combination of both. Jeffreys hired rustlers to make off with Dad's beef, leaving Dad wide open to foreclosure when the bank notes came due. Put it any way you like, Jeffreys is robbing Dad of his home, of what he's worked for all his life."

Slim came to his feet, towering over her. "Is that why you were headed for Los Alamos today by way of the Ladder—to have a talk with the bankers?"

"No," she said in a dull voice. "Saul Fetterman, the cashier at the Stockman's, would have laughed in my face. But I knew where I could borrow enough money to save Box J. Only now, after having that accident on the Ladder, even that hope is gone. I couldn't get to Los Alamos in time."

Slim took a turn around the floor, ignoring the numerous dribbles of rainwater leaking through the patchwork roof. Finally he wheeled around and regarded her curiously. "Mind telling me how you aimed to rustle up the money to save Box J, Beth?"

Under ordinary circumstances, she would have rebelled at the presumption of his question. But, for some reason she could not define, it was easy to talk to this man. The warmth of his personality, the gentle gallantry in his voice, had made her forget her suspicions of Slim.

"There's a man down in Los Alamos who has been wanting to marry me for a long time. He would have helped me financially."

Slim's eyes narrowed speculatively. "What's his name, Beth?"

"What possible difference could that make to you?" she countered.

"I just wondered," Slim said, "what kind of man would take advantage of a situation like yours to marry a girl who didn't love him."

This stranger seemed to have an uncanny ability to read her innermost thoughts. "Who says I don't love Todd Corley?" Her suitor's name had escaped her lips without her realizing it.

"Todd Corley," Slim mused, hunkering down to stoke the fire with fresh wood. "He's the owner of Corley's Mercantile, I take it. He sold me a box of cartridges this morning. He struck me as being old enough to be your father."

HUMILIATION brought color to Beth Jarrod's cheeks. "Todd Corley is only forty-two. And he's a successful business man, a deacon in the church, the postmaster of the town. You have no right to poke fun at him."

Merriment twinkled in Slim's eyes. "But you don't love him. He loves you, sure—as what man with a pair of eyes in his head wouldn't?"

Beth said in a controlled voice, pretending to ignore his compliment, "I didn't say I was going to Los Alamos to agree to marry Todd Corley. I was going to ask him to lend us the money to keep that cattle syndicate from taking over our graze. That's all."

A grin plucked at the corner of Slim's mouth. "What if Corley's loan had strings attached? What if he asked you to marry him in return for the favor?"

Beth Jarrod looked away. She had asked herself that same question a dozen times, riding out from Box J today. Did saving her father's ranch mean enough to her to make marriage to a miserly, middle-aged storekeeper worthwhile?

"My personal affairs—are none of your business, Slim," she said lamely. "I refuse to discuss the topic any longer."

Slim came to his feet, hitching his shell belts. His eyes seemed very thoughtful, his thoughts far away. "I'll bunk up in the prospect hole," he said suddenly. "And don't feel sorry for me. I'll be in a drier spot there than here."

Fear touched Beth Jarrod again. The prospect hole! Of course, that was where the rider in the black slicker would be, right now. It was the only shelter from the storm which this bleak canyon offered. Slim was going to carry through with whatever rendezvous had brought him up the Ladder Ledge today, a tryst which had been postponed by her presence here.

"Being a woman," Slim went on, "I can see that you might be a mite nervous about being alone, under the circumstances. So I'll leave my gun with you."

Beth took the sixgun from his hand, hefting its perfectly balanced weight, her eyes going automatically to the cylinder to make certain the weapon was loaded.

As if reading her thought, Slim added, "Five shells, with an empty under the firing pin. Being a ranch girl, I assume you know how to use a gun."

Beth lowered the gun to her lap. "I know how to use it. Why did you do this, Slim?"

He was heading for the stable door now. "Like I said, a woman might get a mite nervous. Now, if anyone tries to step inside this shack during the night, you'll be prepared. You might remember your father's motto—shoot first, argue afterward."

He was gone then, without so much as saying good-night.

Lying in her blankets in the dry corner of the cabin, exhausted to the core of her being, Beth found it impossible to surrender to the sleep for which her whole body cried out. Her bruised, throbbing legs were not keeping her awake; it was her gnawing uncertainty over the stranger she knew must have been waiting at this isolated place for Slim to show up.

Outside, the storm had reached its peak and was blowing itself out. The rain had ceased, followed by an icy wind which pressed relentlessly against the cabin, ripping an occasional shingle from the roof, puffing smoke from the dying fire out into the room.

Finally, unable to endure the suspense any longer, Beth crawled out of Slim's bedroll and picked up the sixgun she had placed carefully beside her. She would slip up to the mine and see what was going on there.

Opening the stable door, she stepped into the shed. Moonlight shafted through a break in the stable roof, revealing a pair of tooled-leather saddlebags hanging from a wooden peg, alongside a saddle she recognized as Slim's.

She could not say for sure, but she was willing to wager her last cent that her memory was right: there had been no cantlebags strapped behind Slim's saddle. These pouches were well-oiled, expensive; obviously they hadn't been left here by some previous visitor to Crawford's cabin.

Beth felt herself drawn toward the saddlebags. Shifting the sixgun to her left hand, she reached up and unbuckled the flap straps of the nearest pouch. Rummaging inside, she drew out a canvas sack which seemed unnaturally heavy for its size, as if it were loaded with metal.

Holding the canvas bag in a shaft of moonlight, Beth made out the printed lettering on the fabric: WELLS-FARGO EXPRESS COMPANY. Her heart, for no reason at all, began slugging her ribs. Sinking to her knees, she laid the sixgun on the ground and feverishly began untying the bag.

SPREADING the bag open, Beth stared incredulously at its contents—gold coins, newly-minted double eagles. It was an express shipment of some kind, beyond a doubt.

They're stage robbers, Slim and the other one, she thought. They held up a stage somewhere down in the valley and then separated, after agreeing to meet here later.

She fastened up the bag and returned it to the pouch, then discovered that each saddlebag contained two of the gold-laden money pouches.

So much money . . . the unbidden thought came to her, making her feel as guilty as she had ever felt in her life. What was to prevent her escaping from this place, now that the storm had passed, and taking this outlaw loot with her? It would be more than enough to take care of Box J's obligations at the bank. And who would ever trace how this money had come into her possession?

She picked up the gun, knowing it put her in command of any situation that might develop in the morning. She remembered Slim's warning about the buckskin being a one-man horse, and was ready to believe him on that score. Even on a familiar horse, it would be next to impossible riding the rest of the way down the Ladder Ledge by moonlight.

I'll wait until morning, she decided. Slim can't fail to notice these saddlebags in daylight. Facing him, I can tell whether he knows what's in them. And he will brand himself as an outlaw if he refuses to consider returning that gold to the Wells-Fargo office in town.

She had left the cabin with the intention of climbing up to Crawford's prospect hole and, quite possibly, surprising Slim and the stranger in a pow-wow. But now a worm of doubt was stirring in her mind. The saddlebags must belong to the stranger; it was unfair to leap to the conclusion that Slim had had any part in a stage robbery.

She returned to her bedroll, once more turning in without so much as taking off her boots. She laid the six-gun carefully at her side, handy to her reach, knowing that the slightest unusual noise would rouse her. This time, her nerves felt relaxed, her mind at peace. She drifted off into a deep sleep.

She roused to find morning sunlight streaming into the cabin, and Slim going about the business of preparing breakfast. How she had slept through his fire-making preparations, she could not understand; but the fact that the coffee pot was steaming boisterously was proof of how deep her sleep had been.

Beth sat bolt upright in the soogans, her hand recoiling instinctinctively as her palm touched the cold metal of Slim's six-gun, still lying on the dirt floor beside her. With plenty of opportunity to do so, Slim had not yet recovered his weapon; its holster was conspicuously empty at his side.

"You're a fetching sight when you're asleep, Beth," Slim said, glancing up from the chore of slicing sowbelly strips into the skillet. "Reminded me of the Sleeping Beauty fariy tale my mother used to tell me when I was a kid."

She picked up the gun, as she shook off the blankets and stood up. The stable door was wide open; she could see the saddlebags still hanging beside Slim's saddle. So she hadn't dreamed about that Wells-Fargo gold, then.

"I slept well, thank you," Beth said awkwardly. "How about you?"

"All right. It was a mite drafty up in that mine tunnel. Hole must lead to another exit somewhere, the way the wind blew through it all night."

She found herself thinking, maybe that's how his friend in the black slicker got out of here. Aloud, Beth said, "I'm going down to the creek to wash. I'm sorry I didn't wake up in time to have breakfast ready for you."

He grinned boyishly, then said, "Beth, how much money were you figuring to brace Todd Corley for?"

She replied without thinking, "Five thousand dollars, counting the accrued interest. Not very much when you realize what Box J range would be worth to Apache."

He gestured with his bowie knife toward the deal table. "You won't have to sell yourself to that bald-headed storekeekeeper, Beth. Take a look yonder."

She turned her head and stared at the dazzling stacks of metal disks, lemon-yellow in the sunlight, which were piled like poker chips beside her tin plate.

HEAD reeling, the girl lurched forward to stare down at the specie. Unconsciously, then, she swung her gaze out the stall door, realizing now that the saddlebags were no longer bulging and plump, but flat and empty.

"Slim, where did you get all this money?"

The big rider gestured with his knife blade toward the four empty canvas sacks lying on the table beside the money.

"Wells-Fargo. Where else, in this part of the country?"

"Slim, are you trying to tell me you're a—a stage robber?"

The big rider threw back his head and laughed. "What if I am?" he said finally, calmly going on with his bacon cutting. "There's an even five thousand dollars there. By a most amazing coincidence, it's just enough to buy up your father's paper. You can laugh in Tom Jeffreys' face when he shows up with his beef herd tomorrow. What difference does it make where it came from?"

Beth swallowed hard. "Are you trying to tell me you're willing to lend me so much money, Slim?"

Slim's face went sober. He waited until he had set the skillet on the coals before he faced her. "Money," he said gravely, "is just chunks of metal. If it will bail you out of your troubles on Box J, it's yours. And I won't suggest the same collateral Todd Corley would have, Beth."

She shook her head dazedly. "But why are you doing this? Why?"

Slim looked away. "Let's say," he murmured, "it's worth the price to see how Tom Jeffreys takes it when he finds out he can't move a syndicate beef herd onto summer graze he has no right to."

Beth Jarrod pulled her eyes away from the neatly stacked piles of shimmering yellow coins.

"Slim, look at me."

He turned, obedient to the wistful note in her voice.

"A pleasure, looking at you, Beth."

"Slim, where did you get this money? I know it's Wells-Fargo money. How did *you* get it?"

Slim tongued his cheek thoughtfully, his

[*Turn page*]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**for work and play**

Lee CLOTHES

eyes going grave. "It's a longish story, Beth. You see, I happen—"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by the sound of a man's clearing his throat, over by the front door of the shack. Seeing the shock cross Slim's face as he jerked his head around, Beth turned to see the doorway filled by the tall, meatless frame of a man in a Stetson, mackinaw, and flaring batwing chaps.

Something about the slope of the man's shoulders, the droop of his hat brim, made her recognize him instantly at the rider who had slipped away up the canyon last night. A brown-paper cigarette drooped from the man's lips, smoke wisping from its tip. But it was the black bore of the sixgun clutched in this intruder's hand that riveted Beth's attention. The gun was trained on Slim.

"I thought it over, Slim," came the grating voice of the stranger in the doorway. "It's no dice. You don't turn that money over to the girl."

Beth's glance flicked back to Slim. He had gone very pale, and his hands were raised, in obedience to the menace of the gun drop.

"Taking things into your own hands, Vance?" Slime asked softly. "Got ideas about hanging onto that money yourself, maybe?"

Vance shook his head and took another step into the room.

"You know the orders. You know what the money's for, Slim—outright purchase."

A silence settled down over the tense scene. All Beth could gather from this exchange was that Slim and this Vance knew each other; they had undoubtedly arranged this meeting here. To divide the spoils of some hold-up? She wasn't sure in her mind about that, now.

"You look foolish standing there with a gun in your hand, Vance," Slim drawled. "Put your cards on the table."

Vance's upper lip curled, revealing his tobacco-stained teeth.

"I say you've sold your outfit down the river. Your head was turned by a pretty girl, Slim. When the Old Man hears what I have to say, it wouldn't surprise me if I didn't wind up with your job. I'm taking you in to face the Old Man, Slim. So reach for that gun and toss it in my direction."

Slim made no move to lower his arms. His eyes held a black glitter of anger as he met Vance's challenging stare. But when he spoke, Slim's words were directed to Beth.

"I'm forgetting my manners, Beth. You're looking at Joe Vance, the man who ramrodded that rustling raid on Box J last summer, the man who tried to bushwhack your father and flubbed it. When you told me last night why Box J was facing bankruptcy, I couldn't believe it, knowing Jeffreys better than you do. But Joe Vance did quite a bit of talking last night."

FROM the doorway came Vance's warning, "Shut up, Slim, and unlimber that gun!"

Beth became aware of something, then, which had not occurred to her before. She had, by force of habit, thrust Slim's borrowed sixgun into her own holster. Standing where she was, behind the deal table, Joe Vance could not know she was armed.

In a clear, distinct voice, the girl said to Slim, "He means it. Throw him your gun."

For an instant their eyes met, Slim's and Beth's. Her message reached out to him; she saw him shrug as if in resignation and lower his arms, gripping the handle of his gun gingerly between thumb and forefinger and lifting the .45 out of its holster.

"Throw it this way," Vance said. "No Injun tricks, now."

Slim tossed the gun onto the muddy floor a yard in front of Joe Vance, forcing the gunman to step forward as he stooped to reach for the weapon, the action moving his own Colt out of line of Slim's chest.

In that instant Beth Jarrod made her play. Her right hand snapped upward behind the rim of the table, the double click of the Colt coming to full cock sounding whipcrack loud in her ears.

"Hold it, Vance."

Joe Vance froze, his outstretched hand barely inches away from Slim's revolver, his own gun in an awkward position, muzzle pointing toward the floor. The man's eyes focussed on the bore of the sixgun in Beth Jarrod's hand, and he seemed to sense by the rock-steady grip of Beth's hand that she was

a girl who would not hesitate to shoot when the chips were down.

With a muttered oath, Vance let his own sixgun drop to the dirt. He straightened up, moving back a pace and then halting as he saw Beth's finger tighten on the trigger.

Slim was moving fast now, crossing the room in two reaching strides to snatch up his own and Vance's weapon. Edging around from the girl's line of fire, Slim said, "Thanks, Beth. This sidewinder had no intention of letting either of us leave this place alive. You would have marched us down-canyon and over the edge of the Ladder, wouldn't you, Vance?"

Joe Vance licked his lips. "You'll do the same by me, Slim, if you have any brains. Otherwise you're finished with Apache."

Beth was struck aghast by the implication of Vance's words. Slim was one of cattle king Tom Jeffrey's hated gun riders, then.

"Yeah," Joe Vance went on, his confidence returning. "Even you aren't bigger than the Old Man's syndicate, Slim. He'll nail your hide to the fence for doublecrossing him as quick as he would the lowliest half-breed wrangler on the Apache payroll."

Slim said in a weary voice, "You'll find my rope out in the stable, Beth. Get it. I'm hogtying Vance for the time being."

As Beth hurried toward the stable door to get Slim's rope, she heard Joe Vance's taunting rejoinder. "Why are you making me your prisoner, Slim? For protecting the syndicate's interests? For obeying the Old Man's orders? I tell you you're finished, Slim. You'd better pull those triggers while you can."

With trembling haste Beth unbuckled the same rope which Slim had used to save her life yesterday—what an eternity ago that mishap seemed—and hurried back into the cabin.

"I haven't figured out how to handle you, Vance," Slim said, as Beth joined him. "But meanwhile, put your hands behind your back. Beth, I won't start tying up this sidewinder until you've got him covered. Joe Vance is tricky as they come."

Beth was heading back to the table to pick up the extra gun, when it happened. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Vance's arms come down, and then the room was filled with the roar and crash of guns. Joe Vance, out of nowhere, had produced a deadly little stub-nosed .41 derringer.

But the heavy Colts in Slim's fists were bucking in unison, and the jarring impact of point-blank bullets was driving Joe Vance's lurching body hard against the door.

His legs sprawled across the dirt floor, spur rowels gouging twin furrows through the gumbo. He landed in a sitting position, blood beginning to stain his hickory shirt. Then he toppled sidewise and rolled half over on his chest, a ribbon of smoke seeping from the muzzle of his pistol.

Slim choked out, "I'd forgotten he was left handed. I was half expecting him to yank a sleeve gun, but I was watching the wrong hand."

NAUSEA stabbed Beth Jarrod; she turned away from the gruesome sight of the dead man sprawled at their feet. Then she saw the bright shine of seeping blood spilling across Slim's cheeks, dripping from his jaw and running under his bandanna neckerchief.

She was at his side then, dropping her own gun, snatching a handkerchief from her shirt pocket to dab at the shallow track of a derringer bullet slanting from cheekbone to temple.

"Not hurt bad enough to soil a girl's hankie, Beth," Slim said, shoving his guns into their holsters. "You go outside. I'll have Vance's carcass out of here before I call you in to breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Beth choked out. "I don't think I can ever eat a bite again."

Slim's jaws hardened. He was wiping the blood off his face with his own bandanna now.

"Get out, Beth!" he ordered sharply. "We have a hard ride ahead of us this morning. We've got to eat."

She stumbled through the doorway into the warm sunshine, aware that the sun was caught in the upper notch of Obsidian Gulch, which told her that it was less than an hour after sunrise.

Not looking back at the cabin, the girl made her way down the steep slope to the

creek, and washed her face and hands in the icy water. Her head felt clearer and the queasy sensation was gone from her stomach now, but, as she sat on the creek bank waiting for Slim's call, the confusion of her thoughts was enough to make her dizzy.

Slim and Joe Vance were Apache syndicate riders; that was about all she knew for sure. They had camped out during the night in the mine tunnel; Vance, waiting here, had been careful not to let himself be seen when Slim had arrived at the cabin with a girl mounted on his pony.

Joe Vance, it would appear, had brought the money to Crawford's shack; and Slim, for some reason she could not fathom, had offered to turn that money over to her to rescue Box J. It all added up to a riddle which was too difficult for her to unravel.

When Slim called her back to the miner's hut ten minutes later, she saw no trace of the dead Joe Vance, but there was another horse standing in the stall beside Slim's buckskin.

"Soup's on," Slim said. Then, after a moment, he added, "On the trip down to Los Alamos, you'll ride Vance's horse, I'll fork my buckskin. You remember what I told you about Buck's being a one-man horse."

The gold coins, Beth noticed, had been returned to the canvas bags, and they in turn had been stowed in the *alforja* pouches. Slim was pouring coffee into her tin cup when Beth said suddenly, "Slim, I can't go on being in the dark about things. I knew the moment we stepped into this cabin last night that someone had just slipped out. Vance left a burning cigarette behind."

Sipping coffee from a tin saucer, Slim regarded her smilingly. "I wondered if you had seen that quirly butt, Beth. Didn't spot it myself until I was laying the fire. I tried to get rid of it, since Vance smoked cigarettes with a different color paper than mine."

"You and he had arranged to meet here, hadn't you, Slim?"

He made no attempt ot deny the truth. "Vance drew that money from the Wells-Fargo agent in Los Alamos two days ago," he admitted. "The money was intended for your father, Beth, to buy out Box J. It was actually ten thousand, twice what old Larrabee owed the bank."

Beth asked, with bafflement in her voice, "A tinhorn gunslinger like Vance was going to offer to buy Dad's ranch for a fraction of what it's worth?"

Slim avoided her eyes. "That was Tom Jeffreys' idea. You know Apache has two-thousand-odd head of steers moving toward the Mogollon Rim. Jeffreys wanted to make sure Box J graze was available in advance of his coming. That's why he sent Vance and me on ahead, to iron out the details."

BETH set her empty coffee cup aside and pulled in a long breath. "Suppose you begin at the beginning and tell me everything, Slim, including what Vance meant about your doublecrossing Apache. Who are you, Slim?"

A faint smile touched his lips. "I happen to be head foreman for Apache Land & Cattle Company, that's all. It's my job to see that the combine's spreads, from Texas to Nevada, keep operating smoothly. Ferris Montgomber, the banker who held your Dad's mortgage, got in touch with us, said he doubted if Box J would pay off its indebtedness, and offered to sell out to us for ten thousand.

"But it was my idea—without knowing about the rustling raid, remember—to approach your father face to face and offer him that ten thousand direct, so he could salvage what he could. I actually believed what I'd heard about Larrabee Jarrod's waiting to bushwhack any syndicate rider he caught coming up the valley road. That's why I took the Ladder trail."

"Where does Joe Vance fit in? It was he who had the money. Those saddlebags weren't on your horse yesterday."

Slim colored. "I reached Los Alamos a day behind schedule. Vance was the man Tom Jeffreys had selected to run Box J after we took over. Vance was quite legitimate in drawing that ten thousand from Wells-Fargo, Beth. It was Vance who left word for me not to risk the valley road, but to meet him here, midway up the Ladder trail."

A smile touched Beth's lips. "And you found me instead—the daughter of the rancher you were planning to evict, after robbing him blind and trying to bushwhack him failed to drive him out."

Slim looked up, anguish touching his eyes. "I found out from your own lips, Beth—for the first time, I swear it—about that rustling raid, and about your father's being attacked from ambush. I never suspected Apache was freezing out Box J just to get summer graze."

Beth's eyes snapped with anger. "You still don't believe the great Jeffreys would stoop to ruining a small rancher, do you?"

Slim shook his head. "No. I think Vance might have been lying to me. Maybe Jeffreys was as much in the dark about some of the syndicate's methods as I was. I've known Jeffreys a long time, Beth. He's hard-headed, but he's no killer."

After a pause, Beth said, "I don't know why I should place any confidence in what you're saying, Slim. You won't even tell me your real name. And you knew Vance was waiting here."

Slim said miserably, "Yes. I told him what you'd said about the syndicate raiding your spread, about the ambush—"

"And what did Vance say?"

Slim's mouth twisted bleakly. "He laughed in my face. Said I wasn't dry behind the ears yet. Said it was high time I stopped worshipping Tom Jeffreys, and got wise to the facts of life. Like I told you this morning, Vance said Apache was back of that rustling raid, and that Tom Jeffreys had ordered him to get rid of your father. But that last I can't believe."

Understanding was beginning to seep into Beth Jarrod now. "So you suddenly found out," she murmured, "that you are the head of a cattle combine that is operating outside the law. Slim, I think I feel sorry for you. Until now, I regarded you as a random rider who happened to save my life, at considerable risk to your own. Now I believe you are an honest man facing the deepest disillusion anyone could ever face."

There was a tremor in Slim's voice as he said, "That's why I'm pulling out of Apache. That's why I'm going to confront Tom Jeffreys with the truth, when I meet him face to face down in Los Alamos this afternoon."

He got up suddenly and began packing his cooking gear into a towsack. "You're going to use the syndicate's money to settle your father's account at the bank," he said with savage emphasis, "as partial repayment for the cattle Jeffreys stole from you. And when Jeffreys shows up with the herd at the Los Alamos bedground, I'm the one who will tell him that if that beef grazes on Box J this summer, it will be on your father's own terms."

She followed the lean young rider out to the stable shed, saw him saddle the buckskin, then Joe Vance's sorrel stallion. She had no idea where he had disposed of the outlaw's corpse.

Leading the two horses out of the shed, he said gruffly, "You know the deadline we have to meet—the closing of the Stockman's Bank. We won't have much time for talking on the way back down the Ladder. So I'll do my talking now."

He strode up to her, handing her the sorrel's reins, and put both hands on her shoulders. "This Todd Corley, the man who wants to marry you—you don't love him, do you?"

She shook her head, tears glinting on her lashes.

"Does any man anywhere else have a claim on you?"

"Only Todd. We sort of have an understanding. But I don't wear his ring, if that's what you mean."

HE BENT his head, slipping his arms around her and pulling her hard against him. She knew, in a tiny corner of her mind, that she should be resisting this effrontery from a man she had known such a short time, under such extraordinary circumstances; but the pressure of his mouth on hers set her blood to rioting. Without conscious volition her hands crept up to the back of his head, pulling his lips harder against hers.

After an ecstatic interval he released her and stepped back. She said hoarsely, "I don't even know your name."

"You've heard it, Beth," he said grimly. "And knowing it, you might hate me. But I can tell you this—I love you. A man knows when the right woman comes along. I may not get another chance to tell you I love you."

He turned then, stepping into his saddle, and she mounted the dead man's sorrel, experiencing the peculiar sensation that she was

floating on air. Slim spurred off down the creekside trail toward the sheer brink of the Ladder.

He hipped around in his saddle to say, as they neared the brink of Horsetail Falls, "All the way down the Ladder, keep your mind on one thing, Beth—the trail ahead. Vance's horse won't spook, like yours did. But it'll be dangerous going until this ledge is behind us."

"I'll remember," she promised in a shaky voice. "Slim, what did you mean about maybe never getting another chance to tell me you love me?"

He turned away from her, eyes sweeping the awesome expanse of Arizona flatlands stretching off and away from the Mogollon Rim. Deep in the distance, sunrays glinted off windowpanes, marking the site of Los Alamos, down in a bend of the Arrowhead. There was a smudge of dust on the open prairies beyond the cowtown, the dust of a trail herd.

"Tom Jeffreys," he said, "won't take kindly to losing a key man out of his syndicate. It depends on whether Joe Vance was telling the truth about Jeffrey's ordering Larrabee Jarrod's murder this spring. If that's true and Jeffreys knows I know the truth—"

He left the rest unsaid, and spurred the buckskin out into the glassy film of water which sluiced across the Ladder Ledge.

They reached the foot of the dangerous trail in midafternoon. From the foot of the Ladder to the main Arrowhead Canyon wagon road to Box J was a short mile; reaching it, they spurred their jaded horses into a gallop, knowing the race to Los Alamos and the Stockman's Bank would be a very close thing.

The westering sun was putting harsh shadows on the town's false fronts as Slim and Beth rode down the main street and reined in at the brick facade of the Stockman's Bank. As they dismounted, the clock in the ancient courthouse tower was striking five, the closing hour of the bank's business day.

Despair was in Beth Jarrod, as she realized that, technically, the bank owned Box J as of this moment. Ferris Montgomber had warned her father that there would be no extension on the Box J loan, if it was no paid in full with accrued interest by the close of banking on this day.

Slim took her arm and led her across the sidewalk, up the brick steps, and into the bank lobby. The first thing Beth saw was portly old Ferris Montgomber, waddling around the lobby to draw the window blinds, preparatory to closing his bank for the day.

Approaching the door, the banker glanced up, greeted Beth with a curt nod, and then swung his gaze on the cowboy at her side. "Slim!" Montgomber greeted, striding forward and extending a pudging hand. "Glad to see you, son. I understand the Apache herd reached bedground across the river within the hour."

Slim nodded. "So I saw. Right on schedule. Tom Jeffreys is ramrodding that drive personally, Montgomber. He always keeps his appointments."

Montgomber turned to Beth Jarrod with a complacent smile. "I take it," the banker purred, "that Mr. Jeffrey's combine has made arrangements to summer his cattle on Box J, Beth. A pity your father is, uh, incapacitated by gunshot wounds now the time has come for him to move off."

BEFORE Beth could speak, Slim said quietly, "Bank still open for business, Monty?"

The banker clasped his fat palms together and bowed deferentially. "My place of business is always open to accommodate Apache Land & Cattle Company, Slim, you know that."

Slim nodded, tightening his grip on Beth's arm. "I want you to trot out the Box J papers for settlement."

Montgomber blinked. "I—of course, of course, Slim. But I understood that Apache was dealing direct with Larrabee Jarrod in this matter, that you were conducting your business through Wells-Fargo, not my bank."

Slim snapped, "Has Jarrod paid off his loan?"

"He has not, as Miss Jarrod could have told you, Slim. The deadline was today, in case she has forgotten."

"But the bank is still open for business."

The banker's lips firmed. "I'm afraid—"

"You told me just a moment ago the bank was still open for business," Slim cut in. "Then let's get at it."

Montgomber scowled. "I said it was open for business to your syndicate."

"Apache Land & Cattle have a direct interest in the Jarrod ranch, Montgomber. I told you to trot out Larrabee's file."

The prospect of offending a wealthy client, or prospective client, to his bank, erased Ferris Montgomber's bristling attitude instantly. "Of course. Right away, Slim. I'm a bit confused as to the details. My understanding was that you were going to pay off Jarrod, and he would be in to settle his account."

They were heading over to the teller's counter now, Montgomery lifting a hinged fly to reach his files.

"Miss Jarrod is here to pay off Box J's debt," Slim said. "There's nothing complicated about that, is there?"

Montgomber opened filing cabinet drawers, fished out a dossier marked "Jarrod," and spread papers out on the counter.

"The amount due is four thousand, seven hundred and eighty dollars. Do I make out the receipt to Apache Land & Cattle Company?"

"You do not," Slim snapped. "The ranch title is still vested in Beth's father, not the syndicate."

The color fled from Montgomber's face. "According to word I had from Tom Jeffreys only this week, Box J was to become the property of the combine."

Slim was shaking a cascade of gold coins out of a canvas bag. He began stacking the double eagles, lips moving as he counted to himself.

"Four thousand, seven hundred and eighty dollars comes to 239-twenty-dollar gold pieces, Monty," Slim said. "There it is. Count it and give Beth Jarrod a receipt. And mark her father's loan paid in full, as of this date."

Montgomber opened his mouth to say something, then snapped his jaws shut as the street door suddenly opened and two men in dusty range clothing stepped into the Stockman's lobby.

Beth, turning away from the counter, felt her veins chill as she recognized the tall, massive-shouldered man in the lead, a man in his late sixties whose jaw was furred with a silvery beard and whose eyes had the piercing brilliance of chipped ice. It was Tom Jeffreys, the arch-demon who had bedevilled her dreams for months past.

She had seen Jeffreys before, and the raw-boned, gun-hung man at his side was familiar to her too. She remembered that he had paid Box J a visit a year before, trying to buy out her father's spread. She remembered that old Larrabee, in one of his explosive bursts of temper, had drawn a gun on the man and warned him out of Arrowhead Canyon on pain of death.

"Slim!" Tom Jeffreys boomed. "I thought you and Joe Vance were up at the ranch waiting for the herd."

Beth flashed a glance at Slim. She was shocked at the tortured expression on the young rider's face as he stared at the syndicate boss.

"Joe Vance is dead," Slim said dully, making no offer to accept the hand which Tom Jeffreys was holding out in greeting. "He never reached Box J."

Jeffreys' thorny brows arched with surprise. "So," he rumbled, turning to the man at his side. "I should have sent you, Trappis." Jeffreys wheeled back to stare at Slim. "Larrabee Jarrod bushwhacked him, riding in, eh? Didn't give him a chance to present my offer to buy him out at double what he owed the bank here?"

Beth saw Slim's jaw thrust out. "The Box J deal is off, Tom. I killed Vance—with this gun you gave me for my twenty-first birthday, incidentally."

AS HE spoke, Slim lifted a staghorn-butted Colt .45 from its holster. It was a seemingly innocent gestture, to back up his startling revelation. But to Beth, seeing the casual way Slim was hefting the big revolver in front of Tom Jeffreys, the gesture amounted to a draw.

Jeffreys put a big hand out to brace himself against the bank counter. "You shot Joe Vance? You say the Box J deal is off? What are you trying to tell me, Slim?"

Slim licked his lips, staring down at his gun. "You wouldn't want me to tell why I shot Joe Vance, Tom—not in front of Dick Trappis and Ferris Montgomber."

For a long moment, the eyes of the two men locked, seething undercurrents of hos-

tility coursing between them. Then, suddenly, the big cattleman's shoulders slumped and he turned his eyes away. Beth knew Jeffreys had guessed the truth.

Montgomber's shaky voice intruded into the dead silence which built up then. "Mr. Jeffreys, Slim here was about to pay off Box J's loan in full. He instructed me to make out the receipt to Miss Jarrod here, not in the name of the new owner of the spread."

Tom Jeffreys turned slowly to face his ramrod. "You said the deal was off? What does that mean?"

Slim shrugged. "It means that if you drive the combine's herd up to Box J, it will be on Larrabee Jarrod's terms. And he might refuse to lease his range to the syndicate for summer gaze. I couldn't speak for him."

Jeffrey turned his scowling glance toward Beth. "You'll be Larrabee's daughter, ma'am?"

Beth felt her heart knocking her ribs as she stared back at the cattle king's slitted eyes. "Yes."

"How many cattle is your father running on that timber graze this year, ma'am?"

Beth drew courage from Slim's nearness. "A few stragglers, as you well know. Our entire herd was stolen last summer by Joe Vance and his syndicate rustlers."

Tom Jeffreys went on as if he had not heard Beth's accusation. "Your father would not object to leasing his graze to me, then, at a reasonable fee. The grass is going to waste."

Beth shrugged, glancing at Slim for a cue, but finding no readable clue to his thoughts in his stony expression.

"I can't answer for my father, Mr. Jeffreys. Offhand I would say he would not allow one Apache-branded steer to set a hoof on his spread."

Jeffreys turned to Ferris Montgomber. "Make out the receipt to the young lady, Monty. Apparently my legitimate offer to buy out Jarrod was rejected." He turned back to Slim. "I'll expect you to be over at the bedground by sundown, Slim. We're shoving the herd up Arrowhead Canyon tomorrow. You and Trappis will be with me when I show up to tell that two-bit nester my beef will graze on Box J this summer."

Turning on his heel, Tom Jeffreys stalked toward the lobby door, followed by his gunman. Beth saw Slim take a step forward, holding out a hand as if to detain the cattle boss.

Then he called out *"Wait!"* with a note as harsh and flat and decisive as a gunshot.

Jeffreys halted, shoulders hunching up as if he had been struck a blow from behind. He stood there, waiting, not turning to face Slim.

"I won't be out to the bedground tonight, Dad," Slim said tautly. "I'm drawing my time with Apache. And you know why. I won't work for a—a renegade."

Very slowly, Tom Jeffreys swung around. Thrusting big hands into the shellbelts which girdled his paunch, the cattleman said in a lethal whisper which carried across the lobby like a shout, "Slim, don't try to buck me. Don't try to keep my drive from reaching Box J tomorrow. No man can stop me, not even my own flesh and blood."

Slim was staring at the gun in his hand as he answered. "Don't try it, Dad. You'd have to buck my guns to reach Box J. It's the least I can do to atone for what Apache has done to Beth's father."

The old man's teeth flashed scornfully under his ragged mustache. Then he stalked out the door, followed by Dick Trappis.

Beth's eyes were on Slim as he slid his gun back into leather. His face was bleak as he said, "Well, Beth, now you know who I am. Do you hate me?"

She came toward him, ignoring the staring banker across the counter behind them, goggle-eyed at this drama he was witnessing.

"Is Tom Jeffreys your father?"

She came up to him, waiting for him to embrace her as he had done this morning. But his arms hung like dead weights at his side as he said, "I'm Tom Jeffreys, Junior. From the time I was knee-high to a doggie I've been called Slim. Now can you understand why I didn't dare tell you my name?"

Beth reached up to kiss his stubbled cheek. "Oh, Slim, you idiot!" she breathed. "What difference can a name make? I love you, Slim darling. It almost seems as if I have always loved you. I've just been marking time, Slim, waiting for you to ride into my life and claim me for your own."

THEY walked out of the Stockman's Bank into the coppery glare of sunset, in time to see big Tom Jeffreys and Dick Trappis cantering across the shallow river ford which linked Los Alamos town to the bedground on the southern flats.

Tucked away in Beth's pocket was the bank's receipt for her father's loan. She felt no compunction about the source of the money which had paid that debt at the last minute. As Slim had pointed out, it was far less than the value of the cattle Tom Jeffreys had rustled a year ago.

Sensing the tension which rode the man at her side, Beth Jarrod said, "What are we going to do, Slim? About your father, I mean —and what he said about shoving his beef onto Box J regardless?"

"There's nothing anybody can do until Dad actually commits a crime. That moment won't come until the herd reaches your father's drift fence. From Los Alamos up to Box J is government land. I couldn't hope to get a court injunction to keep Apache from driving their cattle up-canyon."

Beth said, "We're borrowing trouble. Your father will have all night to think this thing over. Maybe he won't even shove his herd across the river in the morning."

Slim turned to look down at her, his face very grave. "We'll find a place to eat," he said, "and then we'll book a couple of rooms at the Drover's Hotel for the night. Tomorrow will be time enough to see what Dad's next move will be."

It was well after dark when Beth found herself alone in a second-story room in the Drover's Hotel. During their meal at Anderson's Cafe, Slim hadn't spoken a dozen words. He seemed indrawn, fighting some secret battle with himself.

Now, remembering the warmth of his parting kiss, she realized she would never fathom the depths of the crisis which Slim—Tom Jeffreys, Jr.—was facing tonight. It was father pitted against son, each a man of inflexible will. It was the classic situation she had heard about in school, where an irresistable force met an immovable object.

It was a comfort, knowing that Slim was only a few feet away, in the hotel room across the hall. His window commanded a view of the bedground across the river. He was probably seated there in the darkness now, watching the twinkle of Tom Jeffreys's campfire out on the prairie.

Sheer weariness made her drift off to sleep. It was past midnight when a rumbling sound, like thunder, brought her bolt upright in the blankets, wide awake.

She listened tensely, wondering what kind of storm was making the flimsy walls of the Drover's Hotel tremble like this. Then she knew it wasn't a storm, for the dingy curtains of the window looking out over Los Alamos's main street hung slack in the motionless night air.

Finally she recognized the sound. It was a cattle herd on the move, heading straight up the cowtown's main street. That could only be Apache cattle on the move. Tom Jeffreys was playing his ace. He had shoved the herd across the river by night, intending to be halfway to Box J before sun-up tomorrow.

Trembling, the girl climbed out of bed and went to the window, in time to see the drag-end of the Apache beef herd pass by the hotel.

She rushed over to the washstand and got a lamp lighted. She was pulling on her shirt and levis when she caught sight of the white square of paper thrust under the crack of her door.

She rushed across the room and snatched up the paper, a sheet torn from a wall calendar, knowing even before she saw the penciled writing on it that it was a message from Slim.

> Beth, darling:
> It's ten o'clock and I can't sleep. I'm riding over to Dad's cow camp to tell him to call off his dogs. I'm going to make a bargain with him; I'm going to tell him I'll never divulge his guilt to the law if he'll lay off Box J. And I'll tell him that I intend to ask you to be my wife and, if Larrabee is willing, to live with you up on Box J.
>
> Slim

Ten o'clock—hours ago. Slim had had more than enough time to get to the Apache camp and get back.

What had happened when he invaded his father's camp? The fact that Tom Jeffrey's trail herd was on the move was her answer. Tom Jeffreys had turned down his son's last-

resort offer. And knowing that Slim's inside information could put him behind bars for the rest of his life, maybe Tom Jeffreys had turned his guns on his own flesh and blood!

BETH tried to swallow down her panic, telling herself that by now Slim was back in his room across the hall, his mission across the river a failure.

In trembling haste, Beth fumbled at the key in her door lock and got it open. Then relief flooded through her in waves as she saw a glimmer of lamplight fanning out from under the door of Slim's room. He *had* come back to the hotel. "Slim, it's me, Beth."

She heard a harsh whisper from the other side of the door. "Come on in, Beth."

Beth opened the door to step into the blinding glare of an oil lamp on the table beside Slim's bed. A man was seated there, a cigar clenched between his teeth, greeting her with a leveled six-shooter. It was not Slim. She was staring into the twisted, swarthy countenance of Tom Jeffrey's herd boss, Dick Trappis.

"Don't holler out, baby," Trappis said. "I've been expecting you to show up in Slim's room. Will I do as a substitute?"

She opened her mouth to scream, but the ominous click of Trappis's gun hammer coming to full cock stifled the cry before she could give voice to it.

"Where's Slim?" she demanded. "What have you done to him?"

Trappis came to his feet, passed Beth Jarrod, and closed the door behind her, twisting the key in the lock and pocketing it. She retreated to the far corner of the room, panicked by the realization that she was defenseless here, her own gun hanging from the bedpost in her room across the hall.

"Sit down, baby," Trappis said, gesturing toward a rickety Morris chair at her side. "You and I have a little talking to do before we hit the trail for Box J."

Beth cried, "What's become of Slim? Did Jeffreys murder his own son?"

Trappis sauntered back to the bed and sat down, resting his Colt .45 across his knees. The vile-smelling cheroot waggled in his teeth as he said, "How'd you know Slim crossed the river tonight, baby?"

"He told me so. He went over to plead with his father."

Trappis nodded. "So he did. Slim's like the old man, gutty. It took nerve to visit our camp tonight. Slim knew his father was riled up to the boiling point."

Beth's knees were suddenly too weak to support her weight. She lurched over to the chair and sat down.

"So Slim faced up to the old man," Trappis said. "He made one mistake. He tried to use you as a lever to win the old man over to giving up that summer graze above the Rim. Claimed you and he were getting married tomorrow, figuring Tom Jeffreys wouldn't force the fight if he knew that."

The girl's heart thrilled. "It's true. We love each other."

Trappis smirked lecherously. "That's exactly what Tom Jeffreys is going to use for a hole card tomorrow, baby. Old Larrabee's going to knuckle under to the combine because of you. You beginning to understand why I was waiting in here for you to show up?"

The inference in his words was lost on Beth. She was beginning to see a glimmer of hope that Slim was still alive.

"So the old man tells Slim he'll think over the proposition," Trappis went on. "Slim hadn't no more than crossed back over the river before Jeffreys started things moving. He sent a couple of riders up the canyon, knowing Slim would strike out for Box J ahead of us. Then we got the herd started across the river."

Beth jerked erect. "Slim is riding up the canyon tonight?"

Trappis shrugged. "He didn't come back to the hotel, did he? And Slim must have heard us breaking camp by that time. Sure, he lit on up the canyon. But two of Jeffrey's trouble shooters were up ahead of him. He won't get far."

Beth came to her feet, knowing what she must do. Somewhere up Arrowhead Canyon, right now, Slim was heading into an ambush trap. She had to get out of this hotel and ride out to warn Slim.

"I'm going back to my room, Trappis," she said, fighting to keep the tremor out of her voice. "You can't detain me here against my

will. One scream would wake up the hotel."

Trappis stood up, grinning. "Sure, you're going back to your room—to pick up your boots. You're riding back home with me and the trail herd, baby. Tom Jeffrey's orders."

Her jaw sagged as the meaning of his words hit home. "You're abducting me?"

Trappis fished the door key out of his pocket. "That's harsh talk, coming from a lady. "No, we're just escorting you back home, ma'am. That's all." Trappis unlocked the door and gestured to her to follow him. "You're going to be riding alongside Tom Jeffreys when we show up at your father's fence, baby. The boss has a hunch old Larrabee won't do much shooting when he sees his girl in the line of fire. Then he and old Tom will start bargaining. We won't harm a hair on your head, baby."

THEY left the Drover's Hotel by a rear fire escape, to avoid crossing the lobby in view of the night clerk. To Beth it was like something in a nightmare, knowing that Dick Trappis held a gun on her back.

Waiting for them in the black gut of the alley between the hotel and a wagonyard next door were two saddle horses, bearing the Apache Syndicate's Lazy A iron. Trappis had made no attempt to tie up his prisoner; but after she had mounted, Beth noticed that the Apache gunhawk had dallied her horse's trail rope around his saddle horn, to prevent her attemtping a getaway.

Los Alamas was a sleeping ghost town as they headed up into the notch of Arrowhead Canyon, through the thick, sifting dust which Jeffrey's trail herd had kicked up. Once out of town, Trappis spurred into a gallop.

In less than half an hour they had overtaken the herd, crossing Arrowhead Creek to skirt the strung-out column of cattle. When they crossed over the stream again, it was to find Tom Jeffreys waiting on the Box J road, a hundred yards in advance of his point riders.

There was something unreal about all this —the lonely immensity of the moon-washed canyon, the frosty glitter of snow on the northern peaks behind Box J, the noise the cattle made as they moved up the wagon road.

Seeing Trappis and the girl riding up from the cottonwoods and dwarf willow of the riverbank, Tom Jeffreys doffed his white Stetson in a spurious gesture of gallantry.

"Ah, Miss Jarrod, we meet again. I truly regret the circumstances. I trust my herd boss did not have to invade your sleeping quarters to arrange this little jaunt back home?"

A cold fury welled up in Beth Jerrod as the cattle king spurred his coal-black stallion in between her and Trappis. The three of them started up-canyon, keeping ahead of the herd.

"You sent your paid killers ahead to destroy your own son. What kind of a man are you, Tom Jeffreys?"

The syndicate boss settled his Stetson on his leonine head. "I would not have had it turn out this way, Miss Jarrod. Since Slim was a baby it has been my dream to leave him a cattle empire, when the time came for me to step down. I had not reckoned on a reprobate like Joe Vance telling Slim that his own father was a—a—"

"A common thief, a killer wolf? Is that what you mean?"

Tom Jeffreys shrugged resignedly. "You heard Slim challenge me in the bank yesterday. He knows enough to hang me. It is a question of self-preservation, sending riders ahead to keep Slim from reaching Box J ahead of me, young lady."

Peering straight ahead up the narrowing V of the valley, Beth gasped out an involuntary cry as she saw two riders bearing down on them, riding hard back along the Box J road.

"Lige and Mort," Trappis grunted, as the three of them halted. "Reckon they tallied Slim."

Tom Jeffreys's face was like a graven image, and his fists clutched his saddle horn as the two riders bucked to a dusty halt in front of them.

"Slim gave us the slip, boss," one of the riders reported. "We were waiting for him up at the bend of the road. We saw him coming, but he didn't ride into range of our guns."

A vast outpouring of relief went through Beth. Jeffreys's iron-clamped jaw did not relax.

"What happened, Lige?" barked the cattleman.

Lige gestured off to the west. "Slim cut across the river. We followed his trail to the foot of Ladder Ledge, boss. That's where he went—up the Ladder."

A glad cry burst from Beth's lips, and then she felt a freezing horror go through her as she raised her eyes to the dimly discernible line of the ledge which slanted up the sheer rock face of the canyon's western wall. She knew all too well the perils of that yard-wide shelf. Even in daylight, the Ladder was a death trap. By tricky moonlight, ascending it was suicidal.

"That means Slim'll be waiting for us at the bench!" roared Jeffreys. "You didn't follow him up the Ledge?"

Lige and Mort shook their heads in unison. "We'd turn in our time before we'd risk that trail, day or night, boss. Relax. Slim won't make it. He's probably dead already."

Big Tom Jeffreys stirred in his saddle. There was a note akin to admiration in his voice as he rumbled, "You don't know my son like I do, Lige. If any rider living can climb Ladder Ledge by moonlight, it's Slim. He thinks he's out-foxed me."

Dick Trappis cleared his throat with an ominous sound. "You aren't forgetting what Slim told us in the bank yesterday, boss? That you'd have to buck his guns to shove the herd on Box J?"

Jeffreys picked up his reins, and nodded toward the girl at his stirrup. "The young fool thinks he's in love with this girl. That's why I'm fetching her along. Neither Slim nor old Larrabee will notch their gunsights on us when they spot Beth Jarrod riding up with the herd."

SUNLIGHT was breaking over the tall mass of Green's Peak to eastward when the Apache trail herd gained the level bench above the Mogollon Rim.

Straight ahead, the neat whitewashed adobe buildings of Larrabee Jarrod's Box J ranch gleamed against the black belt of jackpines forming a background to the spread. Fencing in the converging rimrocks of Arrowhead Canyon was the six-strand barbed wire of Box J's drift fence.

The wagon road led through a cattle guard of rough-hewn poles, but Beth knew that Jeffreys would not attempt to funnel the herd through that narrow opening. Nor were his riders equipped to cut the fence and push the steers onto Box J graze.

But there was a hundred-yard gap in the drift fence, where one fork of Arrowhead Creek meandered over the bench and dropped into the canyon. It was toward the creek that Jeffreys' drovers, obeying the signals of their boss, were swinging the point now.

Trappis and old Jeffreys were spurring toward the creek, in advance of the moving herd, boxing in Beth Jarrod's horse. Trappis had his Winchester out of its boot, balanced across his pommel; Jeffreys had removed his brushpopper jumper to clear his belt guns for action.

This fork of the Arrowhead was dry at at this season of the year. As the three riders put their mounts down the gentle slope of the bank and headed up the dry-sand bottom of the creekbed, they caught their first glimpse of old Larrabee Jarrod.

Beth's father, flanked by his roustabout and the Coyotero Indian who lived on the spread, was sitting in a rawhide-bottomed chair on a high knob of ground above the east bank. His splinted leg jutted out under the laprobe spread across his knees; the stock of a Springfield .45-70 was resting on the old rancher's good knee.

She saw her father jerk with surprise and say something to Pedro, the roustabout. Larrabee had spotted his daughter, wedged in between Jeffreys and Trappis. Then old Jarrod raised an arm and his imperative shout rumbled down through the thin morning air, causing Jeffreys and Trappis to halt their mounts.

"You're ten feet from Box J land, Jeffreys. You've come as far as you're going to."

Jeffreys grinned complacently, crowding his horse closer to Beth's mount. "I have two thousand head of hungry cattle behind me, Larrabee. They're ganted down from three weeks of desert fodder, mesquite beans and prickly pear. They smell the buffalo grass up on the bench, and they can't be stopped."

And then Beth's searching eyes saw the rider she was hoping against hope she would see. Slim had made it up the Ladder. He was riding out of a motte of palo verde on

the west side of the creek's barranca now, sitting tall in the saddle, the oblique sunrays glinting on the rifle he was carrying.

She saw Slim's involuntary start of surprise as he got his first glimpse of Beth sitting down there with the two Apache syndicate bosses.

"Send Beth on up ahead, Dad!" Slim shouted. "Even you wouldn't stoop to putting a woman in the line of fire."

Jeffreys grunted. "Wouldn't I? Try shooting and find out, son."

Across the defile from Slim, Larabee Jarrod called out in despair, "Name your terms, Jeffreys. Slim, don't do anything to start lead flying here."

Tom Jeffreys relaxed visibly, proof that he had not been sure his ace in the hole would bluff the Box J boss. "Grant me summer grazing rights, that's all I ask, Larrabee. When I have your word for it that the herd can cross your line, the girl will be the first one across."

Dick Trappis let all hell break loose in the next instant. Beth's ears were straining for her father's surrender when she heard Trappis lever his Winchester and growl viciously, "Hell, we can shoot our way through this."

Trappis's gun came to his shoulder, the long barrel aimed upward at the skylined target which Slim made, etched against the shimmering sky. Slim was looking at Jarrod, not at Trappis.

Beth heard Jeffreys's angry shout at Trappis as she spurred her horse violently against Trappis's stirrup. She heard the ear-splitting explosion of Trappis's Winchester at the same instant that the shock of her lunging horse knocked the gunman's rifle out of line.

Sliding from her stirrups, Beth raced around behind Jeffrey's horse, making for the rocky bank, putting herself in the clear. She saw Slim wheel his horse broadside to Trappis, saw his rifle come up, saw smoke rise from the muzzle.

Trappis, frantically reloading, rocked violently in the saddle from the shock of Slim's unerring slug. She saw him fight for the reins as his big mount began bucking, crazed by the slam and crash of gunfire which engulfed the scene.

UP ON the east bank, Larrabee Jarrod was pumping lead at Tom Jeffreys. The Apache boss had a sixgun in either hand now, triggering slugs at Jarrod and his two men, who had bellied down in the grass now.

Trappis hit the dirt on one shoulder, kicked free of an entangling stirrup as his horse stampeded off down the dry wash. Then Trappis was on one knee, a sixgun in his fist, aiming at Slim while he steadied his Colt barrel across his upraised left arm.

Bracketted by the gunman's whistling lead, Slim came out of the stirrups, levering his Winchester. Scrambling up the bank toward her father, keeping low to avoid the crisscrossing lead, Beth saw Slim take his time, notching his sights on Trappis, squeezing off his shot.

Trappis went down, his spurred boots beating a tattoo in the rubble for a brief time, then slumping inertly, face down.

At the crest of the bank, Beth turned to see that Tom Jeffreys was out of saddle, sitting in a cramped position on the rocky creekbed. His left hand was squeezed to his chest; the girl could see the blood running redly through his splayed fingers. His leonine head was slumped forward.

The brief gunfight was over. Slim was scrambling down the far bank into the creek bed, heading toward his father.

Beth turned to see her father wave, his smoking rifle resting across the arms of his chair, and she knew by his grin that it had been Larrabee's shots that had knocked Jeffreys from horseback, not any shooting that his son had done.

Beth slid back down the bank to join Slim, just as the big rider knelt beside his father and eased the old man down into a more comfortable position. Pink bubbles swelled and burst on Jeffreys's lips; the pallor of approaching death was plain to see on his cheeks.

Across the dying man, Slim looked up and met Beth's eyes. A vast pity went through her, seeing Slim's anguish at the turn events had taken.

"It—it didn't have to happen," Slim choked out. "You wouldn't have used Beth for a shield, Dad . . . you wouldn't."

Tom Jeffreys forced his eyes open, and

reached up to grip his son's hand. "It—shows —what power and greed—can do to an honest man, son," Jeffreys wheezed painfully. "I lost the respect of my own son because—I was too damn proud—to let Jarrod keep me off his piddling graze."

Tears streaked the dust on Slim's haggard face as he squeezed his father's hand. "Wish me luck with Beth, Dad," Slim said gently, clasping the old man's hands with infinite tenderness. "You know I'll always remember what a good father you were to me, not what happened after you grew too big and got warped inside."

Jeffreys swung his glazing eyes toward Beth Jarrod. The girl knelt lower and kissed the old man's brow. "Try to realize, Tom," she whispered, "Dad was fighting to save the home he spent a lifetime building up."

The dying cattle king showed the ghost of a smile. "She's . . . fine woman . . . Slim. Reminds me . . . of your mother. . . ." He fought off a paroxysm of coughing and his voice was clear as he continued, "Apache combine is yours now, Slim, like I always dreamed it would be. My . . . my legacy to you. Disband it . . . if you like. But you're too big a man . . . too much of your mother in you . . . ever to take the wrong fork of the trail . . . like I did."

Beth Jarrod got to her feet and turned away, knowing from the relaxation of Tom Jeffreys's facial muscles that he was dead.

Over the crest of the bank came Lige and Mort and the point riders for the herd. They halted their horses, not reaching for their guns, watching Slim for their next orders, knowing that a dynasty had ended in Tom Jeffreys's death and that Apache Land & Cattle Company was now in Slim's hands.

Slim glanced up the bank to where Pedro and the Indian stood on either side of Larrabee Jarrod. It was Larrabee's decision to make here, not his, as to the disposition of the combine herd.

Slim caught Larrabee's nod, his come-on gesture to the waiting herd drivers beyond the drift fence.

"Shove the herd onto the grass, men!" Slim sent his orders ringing back to the tense, silent riders. "They belong to Box J anyway, not the syndicate. We're just returning what we owe."

Pedro and the Indian came down the barranca slope to carry Tom Jeffreys's body away from the path of the approaching herd.

Moments later Slim and Beth stood side by side before beaming Larrabee Jarrod. "A lot's happened to my little girl," he said to Beth, "since you talked me into letting you go to Los Alamos, day before yesterday."

"I found my love, Dad," Beth murmured. "I'm the happiest girl in the world, right now."

Old Larrabee fingered his patriarchal beard thoughtfully. "And you have my blessings, both of you. It's nice to know you dabbed your twine on such a fine man as young Jeffreys here, honey. You should be proud to bear his name."

Beth Jarrod turned to step into the waiting arms of the new boss of Apache Land & Cattle Company. "We'll name our first son after you, Dad," she said.

"And that," added Slim, "is a promise—Dad."

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## THAT PAPER WAS WORTH PLENTY

**PAPER tickets with pictures of horses stamped on them were worth a dollar apiece in Tubac, Arizona in 1850. They were one denomination of the specially printed money-scrip that was issued at this time to accommodate the swelling Mexican population.**

**Most of these newcomers couldn't read, and so the different amounts were identified with pictures of animals. A bill bearing the representation of a pig was worth approximately 13c. A calf indicated 25c. A rooster ornamented the 50c note. The largest scrip of all, the $5. bill, was decorated with a fierce-looking bull. Only a few of these were issued.**

**Other Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico communities at about this period of time are reputed to have adopted the idea by issuing the same kind of scrip and using similar means of identifying it. As late as 1870 many large cattlemen were issuing their own scrip in order to avoid unnecessary trips to distant banks.**

***—Bess Ritter***

*"Now that we have no law, can't you do something?"*

# Fighting Town

*By J. L. Bouma*

***MARY LOU ASKED for Lee's help . . . but if he did interfere, she'd probably hate him***

MARY LOU said, "You have to do something to stop it, Lee. Eddie might be killed. You'll just have to do something." Her hands were clenched and her eyes pleaded with him. She took a shaky breath, her face showing the marks of her worry. "You know the Imer brothers and what they're like. And Hank Imer would as soon kill Eddie as not."

Lee Dakin thought the Imer brothers were no different from most folks, as long as you let them alone. He leaned against the gate of his corral, his lean, set face turned away from Mary Lou. The sight of her always gave him pleasure, but now he looked away deliberately. In the corral, the horse he had been breaking snorted with pleasure at being rid of his saddle.

"You're imagining too much," Lee said fi-

nally, and hoped, for her sake, that he was right. "All it amounted to was a ruckus at the Saturday night dance. They've probably forgotten about it by now."

"You weren't there; you didn't see what happened," Mary Lou said.

"I heard plenty about it."

Mary Lou moaned with despair. "If they meet tonight, there's sure to be a shooting."

"As long as Eddie doesn't wear a gun, there won't be any trouble."

"But he will wear a gun," Mary Lou said. "That's all he's talked about all week. And he's been practicing his draw every chance he's had."

Lee clenched his jaws to keep from showing disgust. It was like Eddie Heath to talk about what he was going to do, to make a show of it. Eddie would be on his daily stage run to Colton today, and Lee guessed that by now every one between Vista and the railhead knew what had happened, and what might happen tonight.

"The Imer brothers are already in town," Mary Lou said, "and Hank is wearing a gun. Won't you talk to him, Lee? You used to be the town marshal. And now that we have no law—can't you do something to stop it?"

She gripped his arm and looked into his face, and he forced a smile to give her the assurance she needed. But inside he felt sick. He wanted to remind her of what they had meant to each other before Eddie came along. He wanted to remind her of the plans they'd made to marry and live on his small horse ranch, and that he was still living there, alone. And all because Eddie Heath had come to Vista a year ago to drive the stage, and had seen Mary Lou behind the counter of her father's store.

Not that Lee disliked Eddie, for Eddie was not the kind of man folks disliked. Eddie was good-natured, and full of life and laughter, unless he happened to have a few too many under his belt. Then, if you looked carefully enough, you saw a different Eddie beneath the surface. If you knew how to read a man, you saw a surly temper, a pretty wild streak that could prove dangerous. The trouble was that some people like Mary Lou Anderson couldn't see this weakness in Eddie.

"I'll do what I can," Lee said, "but I don't know as it'll do much good."

"I just don't want to see Eddie hurt. You wouldn't want that either, would you?" She was smiling wistfully now, the sun shining on her blond hair, her lips slightly parted. "We've been such good friends, the three of us."

Lee couldn't answer. He took his hat off and wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, feeling the hot sun on his face.

"Will you ride to town before Eddie gets back?" Mary Lou asked.

"All right."

"I knew I could count on you, Lee." She was smiling at him now, not at thoughts of Eddie. "I could always count on you to understand."

Lee wondered how she meant that. When Eddie had first come between them, she had taken to evading Lee in such a subtle way that it hadn't hurt too much. But still Lee had gotten the idea; he knew she had seen something in Eddie that he himself lacked. So he had forced himself to remain casually friendly, and never by word or sign had he shown his hunger for her.

They strolled to her parked buggy. Mary Lou climbed to the seat and smiled down at him. "We have to stand by Eddie, don't we, Lee?"

Lee felt a little stir of anger. "Sure. But there's a line I can't cross, Mary Lou—not in something like this. It's Eddie's fight, and he'd have every right to resent interference. I know I would, in his case."

"I know you'll do what you can, and everything will turn out all right," Mary Lou said, smiling.

She hadn't understood; she was aware only of how she felt about Eddie, and that she didn't want to see him hurt. She said fondly, "You're a very nice person, Lee." Then she picked up the reins and drove out of the yard.

IT TOOK Lee a half hour to clean up and to saddle a horse, and it took him another half hour to reach Vista. Outside of a few stores, the stage depot, Hogan's Saloon, and the lodge hall, there wasn't much left of the town. Three years before, when Lee had been marshal, Vista had been a bustling community. Then the railroad had come through Colton, twenty miles to the east, and most of the merchants had moved to the railroad town.

Now only a handful of people occupied Vista. The town was merely a convenience for the ranchers and homesteaders roundabout and showed a spark of its former life only during the Saturday night dances.

Lee left his horse at the livery stable and strode along the board walk. He saw that two of the ponies tied up in front of Hogan's Saloon belonger to the Imer brothers, and he frowned. Hank and Clem usually stabled their horses rather than have them stand for hours under the hot sun. Today they hadn't, and Lee saw it as a bad sign.

He stopped in Carl Anderson's store, which also contained the post office, and checked his mail box. Mary Lou was not in sight, but her father came over and said, "Mary Lou told me you'd be in. What do you think, Lee? You think there'll be trouble?"

"Never can tell."

Anderson grunted. "The fault was Eddie's. He should never have talked to Hank the way he did. Now he's got to back it up, and I'm worried."

"No need to worry until something happens."

"It's not Eddie I'm worried about "

Lee didn't say anything.

"It's Mary Lou," Anderson went on, watching Lee with shrewd eyes. "If Eddie stands up to Hank, all right. If he doesn't, she'll be hurt."

"You got it backwards."

"You think so?" Anderson answered dryly. "Oh, I can guess she asked you to try to stop it—that's only natural for a woman. But deep down inside they want to be proud of their men. Mary Lou wants to be proud of Eddie. She won't be if he doesn't go through with this business. And either way, in the end she'll hate you for interfering."

"Try and tell her that."

"I know," Anderson said, sighing, and went to wait on a customer.

Lee looked across the street, where afternoon sunlight glittered on Hogan's windows, and on the windows of the lodge hall next door. That was where the trouble had started.

It had been the usual Saturday night dance, the usual crowd. There were the local girls, those from the ranches and the homesteads, clerks, and cowhands, and family men, and children who tired themselves out early and went to sleep in the wagons tethered on the big lot next to the hall.

There was music, the stomping of feet and laughter. And sometimes there came a sudden hush on the heels of a word spoken in anger, and maybe a fight would follow. It was something you expected and didn't think too much about at a dance where most of the menfolk took a nip or two and felt their maleness.

A fight is what should have happened last week, Lee thought. Had Eddie and Hank Imer fought then and there, the whole thing would have been forgotten by morning. But they hadn't. Hank Imer had badgered Mary Lou into dancing with him, and Eddie, who had tipped the jug more than once, had taken offense.

This had been his chance to show what a tough hombre he could be, but Hank hadn't backed down an inch, something Eddie should have known to begin with.

There had been words, deadly words, followed by a flung challenge, an acceptance. That had been a week ago, and now it was another Saturday and the Imers were in the saloon, waiting for five o'clock and Eddie's return from Colton.

Lee left the store and walked slowly across the street. Wagons already filled the big lot, women entered and came out of stores, men lounged here and there in the shade. It was no different from the usual Saturdays, but still not at all like the Saturdays Lee remembered from the time he had been town marshal, when violence had often stalked the crowded, raucous streets.

After the town had broken up it could no longer afford a peace officer, and it hadn't needed one. There had been no trouble in Vista for the past three years, Lee recalled, as he entered Hogan's.

The murmur of voices along the bar ceased suddenly. Lee looked around. There were a dozen or so customers in the place. Hogan gave Lee a bare nod and went about his business, and Lee moved forward slowly and spotted the Imer brothers at the end of the bar. They were long, lanky men, and both wore guns. There was no doubt in Lee's mind that they meant to use them. Hank would, anyhow.

LEE came up to them, and the brothers turned as one, whisky in hand, and stared at him. Then Clem, the younger one, gave a little embarrassed smile and said, "How's the horse business, Lee?"

"Breaking even," Lee said. "How are you boys?"

"We're just fine," Hank said roughly. "Why shouldn't we be?"

"No reason."

Hank grunted and looked up at the wall clock. "Four-thirty," he said, and put his hard gaze on Lee. "You think he'll show?"

Hank could be belligerent, and he was being belligerent now. His face was grim, and what whisky he had drunk didn't show on it. Usually he was a close-mouthed man, tough and proud and independent.

He and his brother farmed in the hills and ran a few cattle, and as a rule they kept to themselves. They were hard workers and respected as such, but Hank was the top man. Lee had guessed for a long time that Hank had his younger brother buffaloed, for Clem, when away from Hank, could be as friendly a neighbor as a man would want. But put him next to his brother, and he became a shadow.

"He's driving the stage, isn't he?" Lee said.

"That doesn't mean a damn thing."

Clem turned his head awkwardly and glanced at his brother, then looked at Lee in the bar mirror and gave a slight shake of his head. Hank caught that play, and he jarred Clem with an elbow and said roughtly, "If you have something to say, say it! But don't be making signs when you think I'm not looking."

Clem reddened. "I just wish you'd forget the whole thing," he said in a troubled voice. "Nothing good'll come of it."

"Suppose you mind your own business," Hank said.

Hogan came over, and Lee ordered a beer. He said, "You boys have one on me."

"What're you trying to do, get me drunk?" Hank snapped. He finished his whisky and stared hard at Lee.

"You know better than that," Lee told him. "Besides, Clem is right. There's no point in all this foolishness."

Hank Imer pushed himself away from the bar. "Foolishness?" he said. "And here I've been thinking all week it was something else." He paused. "A man insults me because I ask his girl for a dance. He gets rough with me. Just because he's got a few drinks in him, he thinks he's the cock of the hill. And I'm supposed to stand still while he shows his hand. Would you have? No, you're damn right you wouldn't. You'd have gone for him then and there."

"Then why didn't you?"

Hank grinned loosely. "Because the damn fool made too much of it. If he wants lead, he'll get lead. It's his own fault. If he doesn't want a man to waltz with that girl of his, why doesn't he keep her out of sight?"

Lee said softly, "Careful, Hank."

Hank bristled. "What's that?"

"Keep her out of it."

"Oh, sure," Hank said disgustedly. And then, looking sharply at Lee, he said, "You taking over for him? Is that why you're here?"

"No. But I'll stop it if I can."

Hank turned back to the bar. "Then you'd better talk to him, because talking to me won't do you any good."

Clem shrugged. "Well," he said, "I for one was hoping you'd change your mind."

"Damn it, are you my brother or aren't you?" Hank said brutally. "Whose side are you on, anyhow?"

Clem sighed. "Your side, I reckon. Haven't I always been on your side?" A little bitterness edged his voice. "Haven't I always done what you told me, even to packing this gun today?"

"Yeah," Hank said. "And you're getting too damn smart to suit me, too."

Clem didn't answer. Lee knew their voices had carried, and now there wasn't a sound in the place, and this business was beyond recall as far as Hank was concerned. He'd said too much, and if there had been any chance at all of talking him out of meeting Eddie, that chance was gone now.

"He's been bragging all week about what he's gonna do to me," Hank said. He turned his head to look at Lee. "You think I haven't heard? Been practicing his draw." He gave a short laugh. "Practicing his draw," he repeated disgustedly, and bragging to impress that little girl of his."

Lee said softly, "I told you once to keep her out of it. I'm not telling you again."

Hank straightened. "Nobody tells me what I can or can't say."

"I'm telling you."

Hank nodded his head. "So I wasn't wrong," he said heavily. "You're siding with him."

"He didn't say that," Clem said. "He's just been trying to make you come to your senses."

"Shut up," Hank said. And to Lee he added, "I'll remember this."

"See that you do," Lee said, and walked out.

FROM the depot he saw the stage coming in the distance, a long boil of dust floating behind. A few farmers and cowhands were standing in front of the livery stable across the street, but there was no sign of the Imer brothers.

It was quiet, except for the faint racket of hoof and wheel, as the stage approached, and the lowering sun cast long shadows as it burned its way out of sight: Then Eddie Heath applied the brakes, as he turned his six-horse team and stopped alongside the depot.

A lone passenger—a drummer—climbed down, reached inside for his sample cases, and lugged them across the street's dust toward Anderson's store. Eddie put a boot on the wheel and jumped down. He confronted Lee with a sick smile, then used his bandanna to wipe dust from his face.

"They here?" he said.

"They're here."

Eddie jammed the bandanna in the back pocket of his levis and hitched at his gun belt, his hands trembling. He wet his lips, tried to spit, but swallowed instead. He was tall and lean and handsome in a boyish sort of way and, watching him, Lee understood that this was one reason Mary Lou had fallen for him.

Eddie dressed well and was in contact with the outside world. He always brought the latest newspapers and magazines, the latest gossip from Colton. It made a difference to a girl cooped up in a town where she saw the same faces day after day.

"I'd better wash up," Eddie said, but he didn't move. "Is he packing a gun?"

Anger flared in Lee. "Wasn't that the idea?"

"I guess."

His voice was shaky. He turned abruptly to the trough, plunged both hands into the dusty water, and splashed it over his face.

Lee watched, and knew it wouldn't be any good, unless Eddie got hold of himself at that last moment. That could happen, of course. Many men were sick with fright until the moment of action, when suddenly, and for no accountable reason, they stiffened with purpose. It was hard to tell until it happened.

Eddie dried his face with the bandanna. "I was thinking I wished it hadn't happened." His lips trembled as he tried to grin at Lee.

"It did happen," Lee said, "but it might not have if you hadn't opened your big mouth."

"I know," Eddie said, not taking offense. "But I got to talking and couldn't stop." The sick smile trembled again on his mouth, but his eyes had a dull look to them, and beads of sweat broke out across his forehead. He wiped the palms of his hands. "What am I gonna do, Lee?"

## MOVING EXPERIENCE

**By S. OMAR BARKER**

**I do not disparage the custom of marriage.**
**In fact I most highly approve it—**
**Except when *ma belle* gets a "furniture spell,"**
**And calls upon me to help move it!**

"You can go and apologize to him, or you can climb on your horse and leave town." Lee paused. "Or you can face up to him."

Eddie gave a shrill little laugh and suddenly cut it short. He squeezed his eyes tight shut and opened them again. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" he said in a high voice. "With me out of the way—"

"Get hold of yourself," Lee said curtly.

Eddie's jaw went slack. "The hell with you," he said dully, and took a long, shaky breath. And then, "I didn't mean that, Lee. It's just—" he looked around —"just that I can't make up my mind." His knees buckled, and he took two faltering steps back, until he was leaning against the side of the depot. Then he leaned forward, hands on thighs, head lowered, and said in a broken voice, "If I leave I can't come back."

"That's right."

"And if I face up to him—"

Lee looked away, disgust rising in him. Eddie had talked big to impress Mary Lou, and now he was in a corner with only the back door open.

He turned his head as a few men drifted into sight, and at his look they stopped and stood there as though this were no concern of theirs. But all their faces broke into little smiles as they regarded Eddie, as much as to say they had expected something like this.

"Well?" Lee said softly.

Eddie straightened and looked away from these men. "I can't," he moaned. "I can't go through with it, Lee."

"Then get out of town, and damn quick."

One of the men said, "Here they come," and Eddie gasped as Hank and Clem Imer strode around the corner of the depot.

Hank gave Lee one hard look, then turned his gaze on Eddie. "Do I have to come looking for you?" he said. "Can't you meet a man half way?"

Eddie's eyes flickered. "I'm not—" he began, and stopped short.

Hank said, as if he'd had enough of waiting, "Stand clear and make your move. Do what you've been saying all week you were gonna do."

Lee had stepped to one side, feeling a dull ache himself because Eddie was backing down, because he was taking the coward's way out. Since he'd started the trouble to begin with, there'd been one other way out for him—to apologize for being in the wrong. But to do something like that took a brave man, and Eddie didn't have it in him to be honest with himself. He was, at best, a loose-mouthed kid who turned tail when his mouth caught up with him. Now all Lee felt for him was pity and disgust.

Hank said contemptuously, "Boys, he looks sick."

Lee turned and said, "That's enough, Hank. Go buy yourself a drink."

"Hell, I don't see any star on your chest," Hank said, not taking his eyes off Eddie. "Hey, small change," he said to Eddie, "what does a man have to say to make you go for your gun?"

EDDIE showed Lee a tight, frightened look and said nothing.

"You're yellow," Hank said. "You like to chase skirts and talk big, but you're yellow as hell."

"Take it easy, Hank," Clem muttered, but Hank ignored him. A little triumph flashed in his eyes as he grinned at Lee, then shifted his gaze back to Eddie.

"If you don't figure to use that gun, what then?" he said. "How you ever gonna face that girl of yours?" His voice hardened. "Unbuckle your gunbelt and drop it, kid! Then get the hell out of town and stay out!"

Eddie, his hands trembling, did as he was told. Two or three men laughed openly. So did Hank. "Now isn't that something?" he said in a mocking way. "All this started because I asked that little girl of his to dance, and you'd think he'd have the guts to stand up for her. Well, I reckon this finishes it, boys."

"You know better than that." Lee stepped over, picked up Eddie's gun belt, and buckled it around his waist. "I gave you two warnings about mentioning Mary Lou's name, and you've mentioned her twice since. All right, Hank, I'm waiting."

Hank's head came up. "I thought you were out of this. I thought you said you weren't siding him."

"You know what I'm talking about," Lee said. "Eddie shot off his mouth and you made

him back down. All right, that was your business. This is mine, so make your move."

Hank glanced quickly at Clem, then at the gun on Lee's hip. He rubbed a hand across his chest. "You know I didn't mean anything by it."

"Is that an apology?"

"I didn't say that," Hank flared.

"Then let's see how fast you are with that gun."

Doubt and pride struggled momentarily on Hank's face. He shot Clem another quick glance. "Get on the other side of him," he said.

Clem's mouth tightened. He folded his arms and stepped away from his brother. "Sure," he said, "but not to help you. It's your fight, so make the best of it, or ride home with me and forget it."

Hank turned and gave his younger brother a long, outraged look, and his mouth opened as though to utter a protest. Clem shook his head and said quietly, "No, Hank, not this time. And not ever again, either."

Hank stared at the ground for a long moment. Finally his head came up and he said, "All right. I'm sorry, Lee. I spoke out of turn. A man does that at times."

"I guess we all do," Lee said.

The crowd broke up and drifted back to the street in silence, as though each man was embarrassed by what had happened.

Lee turned to look for Eddie, but Eddie had gone. He unbuckled the gun belt and pitched it inside the depot. When he stepped outside he found Mary Lou waiting, her eyes wet.

"He's gone, Lee. He picked up his horse at the stable and left town."

"I'm sorry."

She came up to him. "I'm not. Lee, I was a fool for asking you to interfere, but now I'm not sorry."

"Forget it," Lee said.

If he felt disgusted now, it was because of what he had done. Hank hadn't meant anything wrong by mentioning Mary Lou; he hadn't been disrespectful. Lee wondered why he had snapped at Hank to begin with. Was it to help Eddie? Or did he himself need to show off a little where Mary Lou was concerned?

"Do you know why I'm not sorry?" she asked.

Lee shrugged.

"It's because what you did woke me up Dad saw it all and told me what happened. Lee, I've been a fool in more ways than one. It's just that, well, maybe I wasn't ready for marriage."

"Sure," he said, "I can understand that."

"I'm proud of you, Lee."

"That's nice."

She put her hands on his arms, and he saw the pride in her eyes, and something else—a little uncertainty. "Please, Lee," she said. "It'll be better between us now than it was before Eddie came. Will you believe that?"

He grunted something, as hope flared all through him. And then suddenly, he knew it was all right. He put his arms around her.

"Yes, I believe it," he murmured. "I'll believe it as long as I live."

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## PRAIRIE DOG BONANZA

**"FABULOUS" is a term often used to describe the West of the "open range" era—and the people of the time. A Montana Territory man really lived up to the title.**

**The man, Arnold, was a tenderfoot from the East when he came to the Territory. He innocently got involved in a poker game, and the card sharps took every cent. Arnold, however, wasn't beaten. He retired to the prairies, where small rodent-like animals had their mounds by the hundreds. Busily he snared and trapped these animals and boxed them up.**

**He sold the animals to tourists—advertising them as genuine Western prairie dogs. He was nicknamed "Prairie Dog" Arnold then. Later Arnold became a very prosperous rancher, thanks to his prairie dog bonanza!**

*——Ferris Weddle*

*"Shall I get up?" he asked her, "or would you like to kick me while I am down?"*

# Trouble In

*SOMEONE WAS sowing seeds of destruction . . . and Lane Morgan had to find out why, before disaster overtook the woman he loved. . . .*

LANE MORGAN was sitting in the hotel dining room eating breakfast when he heard the wagon rumble through town. He gulped his coffee and limped to the boardwalk. The wagon, jolting along Trail Street to the west, had just turned off Main Street. Already townspeople lined the boardwalks, shouting to the wagon's driver. Then Lane recognized him.

"Henry Wilson," he shouted, stepping into the street, "you're not pulling up stakes, are you?"

Wilson hauled back on the reins. A thin, hawk-faced little man, he said, "I was hoping I'd run into you, Deputy."

Mrs. Wilson's massive hulk loomed from the depths of the wagon. Her round sun-bonneted face peered at Lane. "Why,

# Wild Horse

by TEDDY KELLER

land sakes," she said, "if this place had half a lawman, we wouldn't have to leave."

Lane winced, half in anger, half in shame. "What is all this?" he asked.

"Tell 'im about the shooting and the note, Ma," Wilson said.

"It was while we were eating supper," Mrs. Wilson said. "Somebody shot out all the upstairs windows and threw a rock in the parlor window with a note attached to it."

Lane asked, "What'd the note say?"

"It said, 'You Rebs clear out of here fast. We don't like your kind in Wild Horse.' I thought the Civil War was over."

"It is," Lane said, squinting up at them. "Somebody's just trying to be funny."

"It isn't funny," Wilson said.

Mrs. Wilson said, "It sure isn't. Anyhow we're not staying around to laugh."

"But you can't leave your place," Lane said.

"It didn't cost us anything," Wilson said. "We homesteaded."

"You scare too easy," Lane said, knowing he couldn't shame them. "You're quitters."

Mrs. Wilson leaned from the wagon and shook a huge fist. "Why you no-good cripple," she screeched, "if you'd been protecting us like you should, we wouldn't have to leave."

"I've got a hundred square miles to cover," Lane said, clenching his fists, holding onto himself. "I can't be everywhere. On second thought, go on. This country takes people with guts."

He spun on his good leg and lurched to the boardwalk. He stood for a long minute with his back to the street. Finally a whip cracked and the heavy wagon moved away.

"Lane." A hand touched his shoulder.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax before he faced around toward Cathy Clegg. Compassion welled deep within her dark eyes and worry tugged at her brows, penciling two lines above the firm ridge of her nose. Then her lips parted in a hopeful smile.

"Don't let it bother you," she said. "People shouldn't make fun of a man who was hurt serving his country.

"Okay," Lane said, smiling. "You don't need to wave a flag. Just let me look at you, and I'll be all right."

Taking her hands, he stepped back. Smiling, she cocked her head, her sand-colored hair brushing slender shoulders. His anger fled. The pressure of her hands sent a pleasant tingle up Lane's arms. He felt himself coloring, and released her.

"I have to get back to the bank," she said. "Daddy's worried. The Wilsons owe him money."

"Oh?"

"Not much. Don't worry about it." She backed a step and said "'Bye. See you at supper." Then she turned and hurried away.

Lane's smile shriveled and died as he looked about him. Along the boardwalk, people regarded him with silent accusations. He knew they were thinking that a crippled deputy was little better than no deputy at all. Making no effort to hide his limp, he shuffled to the corner, turned onto Main Street, then into the gleaming white office of Dr. Sanders.

"Morning, Lane," the doctor said, shoving up from his desk. A short, heavy man with a shaggy mane of white hair, he always reminded lane of an albino buffalo.

"Hello, Doc," Lane said, crossing to lean on the desk. "What about this leg of mine?"

"That Apache arrowhead?"

"Yeah."

IN A moment Doc had circled his desk, sat Lane in a chair, and rolled up his left pants leg. Strong but delicate fingers probed Lane's thigh. Lane had heard it said around town that Doc could heft a horse with one hand while he laced six stitches across a flea's back with the other.

"I think it's working to the surface," Doc said, rolling the pants leg down. "I can get it when it's ready, or I can take it now and put you on your back for three weeks."

"Either way's no good."

"Why didn't the Cavalry boys take it out first thing?" Doc asked, moving back to his desk. "Doesn't the Army have any doctors in Arizona?"

"We were on patrol," Lane said. "Ambushed, cut off. It was a week before we got help. Then a sawbones figured the arrow'd better stay put."

"I suppose so." Doc sat thoughtfully. "You might try walking on it a little more."

Lane went out and turned up Main Street. He limped directly to the stable. Saddling his

buckskin mare, he moved to her right and heaved himself up, swinging his game leg across the saddle. Maybe he *was* just half a lawman, he thought bitterly. He couldn't even mount a horse like a man.

Already the sun had climbed well around to the south, and the day promised to be a scorcher. But with the heat came the smell of rich earth and green alfalfa. Abruptly, he caught the musty scent of Squaw Creek, and the buckskin thundered across the timber bridge. Lane eased back on the reins. The mare slowed, then swung left onto the rutted path of the Wilson place.

Lane brought the horse to a halt and hipped sideways, taking the weight off his left leg. The Wilsons had about pegged it when they said they were leaving nothing. With rich bottom land all around, they had barely tried. They had cultivated one narrow strip along the creek for garden. Farther up, a plow had lazily skirted small rocks and trees. A small barn sagged under a broken ridge pole.

Dismounting stiffly, Lane hobbled toward the house. In the garden patch he found deep boot prints. He followed them all around the house, noting where the rifleman had paused to fire, picking up spent cartridge casings, finding the spot where the man had darted in close to pitch his rock into the parlor. The tracks led across the garden again and to timber beside the creek. There Lane found the prints of a horse.

The horse's tracks were entirely regular, and Lane doubted that the blacksmith himself could identify them without bringing out samples of all his shoes. The prints of the man's boots also showed little, other than that they were fairly new.

Mounting, Lane turned to the road toward town. It was hot now. He let the buckskin take it easy. The small cluster of buildings lay in baked silence, shimmering in heat waves as Lane rode into town. He let the buckskin drink slowly, then spent a long time rubbing her down. Finished with her, he was leaving the stable when a sudden hunch turned him back.

He moved up and down the stalls, checking. He was near the end before he found a horse with bits of black dirt caked on its hoofs. Surprise mingled with puzzlement in Lane's mind. Nothing had made sense up to now, and this added up to even less. The roan stallion belonged to Aaron Jarvis.

JANE limped down Main, turned on Trail Street, and went to the Dusty Trail Saloon. In the cool gloom of the place, memory guided him to the bar. When his eyes had adjusted, he found himself staring into the square, dark face of Aaron Jarvis.

"You're early," Jarvis grunted.

Lane peered sharply at Jarvis. In the time he'd been in Wild Horse, Jarvis had always treated him decently, had seemed to go out of his way to be friendly. Now the heavy, handsome features were set in grim lines. The black eyes mirrored nothing.

"Too hot for a meal," Lane said. "How about fixing me a sandwich and a cup of coffee?"

Jarvis grunted and moved to the end of the bar. Lane called after him, "And bring your checkerboard when you come back."

"Too hot for checkers," Jarvis muttered.

Lane rubbed his left leg thoughtfully. For nearly two months he and Jarvis had played checkers every day over their after-dinner coffee. Something more than the Wilsons was eating on the saloonkeeper.

Presently Jarvis came back along the bar, and Lane noticed the man's uneven stride. Jarvis put down plate and cup without a word.

"Thought I was supposed to be the cripple," Lane said, laughing. "How come you're limping."

"New boots," Jarvis said. "Got blisters like silver dollars."

Lane chuckled. "New boots? You must be rich. I haven't seen a new pair in so long I've forgotten what they look like."

"Like old ones," Jarvis said impatiently, "only shinier."

"Let's see."

Jarvis grumbled, but leaned against the back bar and hoisted a boot. It thumped down on the bar. Bits of black dirt flaked off near Lane's coffee cup.

Brushing the dirt aside, Lane said, "Looks like you picked up some of Wilson's bottom land."

For one second rage burned away the veil behind Jarvis's eyes. And Lane gazed straight

into hell. Then the veil slid back and only the square, out-thrust jaw gave evidence of fury.

"Yeah," Jarvis said.

Lane took a bite of sandwich. "What'd you have against Wilson?"

"Nothing."

"Then why'd you run him out?"

Jarvis stared at Lane for a moment and a corner of his wide flat mouth curved slightly. He said, "That's none of your damn business."

"You must've had a reason."

"Maybe I didn't like the way Wilson wore his hat," Jarvis said. "Or maybe I didn't like that cow he has for a wife."

"I doubt it."

Jarvis hunched forward suddenly, thick shoulders taut, fists clenched on the bar. He growled, "Sure, I ran Wilson off. I shot out his windows and I threw a rock in his parlor. Now what're you gonna do about it?"

Lane silently chewed his sandwich.

"You saw my tracks," Jarvis said, "but who's going to bring charges against me? Who's going to testify? Who're your witnesses? What charge can you file anyhow? Maybe disturbing the peace. And even then it's just your word against mine."

Lane swallowed the last of his sandwich and gulped coffee. Tossing a dime on the bar, he walked out. He hated leaving a triumphant Jarvis behind, but he didn't know what else to do. Everything Jarvis had said was true. Lane could do little.

Nothing made sense. Jarvis had made no effort to deny running off the Wilsons. He had been almost boastful. But why? The note had been a blind. Jarvis was no Yankee patriot. And Wilson was not a drinking man; it seemed unlikely that he'd have run up a bill at the Dusty Trail. Then why, why, why?

THESE questions hammered at Lane through a long afternoon. By suppertime he had figured out exactly nothing. Face set in grim lines, he left his office and limped to the Clegg's. Cathy answered his knock.

"Come in," she said warmly. "Daddy's in the living room. You two talk while I get things on the table."

She had changed into a cool blue dress of some crisp material, and had tied her hair back from her neck. Kissing him lightly, she hurried to the kitchen. Lane felt that pleasant tingle seeping through him. It was almost like a drug, erasing his pain, leaving him vaguely giddy. He smiled as he entered the living room.

Homer Clegg rose from his platform rocker near the bay window. His firm features were set in a round face, and he wore his white-fringed bare scalp with a dignity that made men with hair appear unnatural.

"Evening, Lane," he said, extending a hand. "This sure was a hot day."

Lane nodded, and sank onto the horsehair sofa. Stretching his game leg, he rubbed at it absently. The cool dimness of the house soothed him. He leaned his head back and half closed his eyes.

At dinner, Mr. Clegg said, "Lane, if you'll come to see us often enough, we may put some meat on your bones."

"You mean," Lane asked, "you want me to get fat like you?"

They all laughed, and Cathy passed the plate of fried chicken. It was even better than Lane had anticipated. Everything was good. Through the meal, he couldn't keep his gaze off Cathy. He wondered how it would be with her fixing all his meals, and always being there with her ready smile and her understanding.

After the meal was ended, Mr. Clegg pushed back his chair and passed cigars. Abruptly he asked, "Did you find out anything about the Wilsons?"

Lane stalled over lighting his cigar, wondering what to say, how to say it. Finally he said, "Not much."

"I don't know how to put it," Clegg said, blowing smoke. "I'm not even certain what I mean. But I have a feeling. Lane, there's something wrong here. I don't know what it is, or who's behind it, but Wild Horse is heading for trouble."

Cathy said, People are upset about the Wilsons leaving."

"Somebody had a reason for wanting the Wilsons gone," Clegg said.

Lane had no answer. The note and the shooting, he knew, couldn't be overlooked.

"It's not so much the person who's behind it," Cathy said, "as the reason. Why would

*Lane rode until exhausted, then dismounted and walked*

anyone want to scare the Wilsons away? They weren't bothering anybody."

"The obvious guess," Lane said, "is that somebody wants that farm without paying much for it."

Clegg tapped ashes into his saucer. "As things stand, that somebody can have the place for two hundred dollars. That's the amount of the note I held on Wilson."

"Will that hurt the bank?" Lane asked.

"No, two hundred dollars won't break us. But it may be a long while before we come even. Not many new folks come through this country any more. That farm may stand idle for a year."

Lane said, "Then there's not much to worry about."

"Not yet," Clegg admitted. "It's just the feeling I have that this isn't the end of it. This is the beginning."

"I hope you're wrong," Cathy said without assurance.

Lane," Clegg said, "may I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

The banker puffed up his cigar and stared at the glowing tip. Then he said, "I'd like to send to Sheriff Reed and ask him for some help for you."

SHAME and anger erupted inside Lane, flushing his face. He massaged his leg and said, "If you don't think I'm competent, say it out straight."

"Oh, Lane," Cathy said, "we're not accusing you of incompetence."

"Of course not, my boy," Clegg said quickly. "We have every faith in your efficiency. But it's like this. You have a hundred square miles to cover—almost the whole northern half of Buffalo County. When things are peaceful, that's well and good. But if there's trouble, it's simply a physical impossibility for one man to be everywhere at once."

"Especially a cripple," Lane said bitterly.

"That has nothing to do with it," Clegg said.

Lane shoved up from the table and limped to the door. Turning, he said, "Don't bother sending to Clearwater for help. I'll tell Tom Reed all about it when I ride down there tomorrow to resign."

He wheeled around, ignoring the pleas from Cathy and her father. He stalked out the door and across the porch. A protruding nail snagged his dragging left foot, and he pitched headlong down the steps. Flame seared along his left leg, then flashed through his body. He lay for a moment, completely shaken. Finally, blinking against dizziness, he heaved to a sitting position. Cathy stood on the porch. She made no move to help him.

"Shall I get up," Lane asked, "or would you like to kick me while I'm down?"

A sob pinched up from Cathy's throat and she took a step toward him. Then she caught herself. Calmly, she said, "Self-pity is a terrible disease, Lane. It's not your body that's crippled, it's your mind. Stop feeling sorry—" Her voice broke and she paused for control. Then, "Stop feeling sorry for yourself and be a man."

She whirled and rushed into the house. Lane sat there, staring after her, stunned by her words. He rubbed methodically at his leg. Then shock passed and anger burned through him. It wasn't his faul he'd stopped that arrow. And he'd have had it removed immediately, except for the little matter of a desert full of Apaches.

Shoving to his feet, Lane limped to the gate and up the street. Only that morning Cathy had sharply criticized folks who ridiculed a man wounded in the service of his country. Now she had turned on him. Well, if he wasn't good enough for her and her father, they could do the worrying about policing Wild Horse and the north half of Buffalo County.

Lane's leg came alive with fiery needles of pain as he climbed to his second-floor room at the hotel. Exhausted, he sank to the bed. He rolled a cigarette and squinted against the brightness of the match.

Maybe he should have told the Cleggs about Aaron Jarvis. But what could that have accomplished? Knowing the man responsible was only part of the puzzle. What was his reason?

Lane undressed and crawled into bed. But sleep didn't come. His leg throbbed. Cathy kept pushing into his thinking. He knew that neither getting mad nor quitting his job would solve the personal part of his problem. He loved Cathy too much to be willing to forget her.

Lane tossed fitfully through the long night, then fell into a heavy sleep. Dawn had come long before he finally climbed from bed. He shaved and dressed and went down, to find the town already bustling. Still puffy-eyed, he ate breakfast, then limped to the sunny boardwalk. He'd have one smoke before he rode out of Wild Horse, for the last time.

He had the cigarette rolled when he heard the sound of wagons. Flicking a match with his thumb nail, he gazed east. A big Conestoga rumbled into town. Another covered wagon was rolling up Main Street from the south. As if by prearrangement, the wagons met at the crossroads. Then they lurched west on Trail Street together.

"Haggarth!" Clegg yelled, running from the bank just behind Lane. "McVicar! You folks aren't leaving?"

The wagons didn't hesitate. From the near one, the red-bearded McVicar shouted, "What does it look like, Clegg?"

"But your farm, man," Clegg pleaded. He side-stepped along the boardwalk, keeping pace with the wagons. "What about your crops?"

"It's all yours," McVicar answered, "lock, stock and mortgage."

Zeb Haggarth stood on the seat of his wagon to shout across to Clegg, "Wild Horse isn't the only town in the world. We're going West."

CLEGG'S step faltered, and for an instant Lane thought he would fall. Then the banker turned, shoulders sagging, chin on chest, and shuffled back toward the bank. An uneasy buzzing ran through the gathered crowds.

Lane sensed the mounting tension. He waited, glancing to the knots of people along the boardwalks. The town was scared. Folks teetered on the brink of panic. The whole thing could blow wide open in a second.

Across the street, one cluster of people slowly broke up. Lane held his breath. Down by the mercantile, a man shook his head and moved away from his group. The others drifted away. Finally, folks began to wander off the street. Lane let out his breath, flipped away his cigarette, and went to the bank.

Clegg sat at his desk, his head in his hands. Cathy stood beside him. When she saw Lane, she moved away.

Lane said, going to the desk, "Have Haggarth and McVicar broken any laws?"

Clegg shook his head. "None that I know of."

"They're handing you their farms instead of paying off their mortgages. Is that right?"

Yes." Clegg looked up at last.

"How much money do they owe you?" Lane asked.

"Over three thousand dollars." Clegg sighed, shook his head, and leaned back in his chair. If this were a booming town, the bank could make a lot of money. But it's like I was saying last evening. We have few travelers through here. Those places may stand idle for years. Three thousand dollars is a lot of money, to a small bank in a small town."

"It's too much for those farms," Lane said.

"I know. But I had faith in those men, and I loaned more than I should have."

Lane asked, "What can you do?"

"If the notes aren't met," Clegg said, smiling wanly, "those farms will be mine. They're no good idle. I guess Cathy and I'll just have to go into farming."

Lane straightened and glanced to Cathy's teller's cage. All the warmth and understanding he had seen before glowed again in her eyes. But her gaze never left her father's face. Lane turned and hobbled out.

He hurried up Main Street, crow-hopping on his right leg to spare his left. He saddled the buckskin mare and rode west. It took him only a few minutes to overtake the wagons. They halted at his signal.

"What's the idea, Morgan?" McVicar roared.

"We haven't done anything," Haggarth protested.

"I want some information," Lane said.

Haggarth stood in his box, a long, skinny man. "We have nothing to say." He flapped his reins and the wagon moved.

"Stop right there!" Lane yelled. When the wagon halted, he said, "If either of you try to move before I'm done with you, I'll drop your lead teams in their tracks."

McVicar swiveled his huge body. "There're a dozen of us," he said, "and at least half know how to shoot. There's just one of you, Morgan. You'd better get out of our way."

"Mac!" Lane dropped his right hand to his side. "Swing your rifle toward me and you're dead before you get a finger on the trigger."

Haggarth croaked lamely, "I wasn't going to shoot."

"Nobody is," Lane said.

McVicar's mammoth body seemed to swell. "Don't bet on it. You watch your dirty mouth, or I'll come down and break you in two."

"You're a coward," Lane said. "You're running off and leaving your friends and neighbors in a mess."

"What're you getting at?" McVicar asked.

"Homer Clegg lent you two more money

than he should have, because he had faith in you. Now he'll be stuck with your places. He can't sell 'em; he can't farm 'em. The whole town's about spooked."

HAGGARTH said, "You can't blame a man for making money, can you?"

"That's what I want to know about," Lane said.

McVicar glanced to Haggarth and said, "That's what we can't talk about."

"You'll talk," Lane said. "You'll tell me all about it, or this is as far West as you go."

"Well, look, Deputy," Haggarth said. "I figured my place was worth about three thousand. I owed fifteen hundred. Somebody give me two thousand to pull out. I'd have been crazy to say no."

"Same deal with you, McVicar?" Lane asked.

McVicar glared at Haggarth, then nodded.

"Who put up the money?"

"We've told you all we're going to," McVicar flared. "Now get out of the way or I'll start shooting."

"You don't have to tell me," Lane said, gambling. "I know it was Aaron Jarvis."

Haggarth's mouth dropped open. He said, "How'd you—"

"Shut up!" McVicar boomed.

Smiling, Lane said, "Thanks, folks." Then the smile faded. He stood in his stirrups and yelled, "Now get out of here. Get out of Wild Horse, out of Buffalo County, out of the whole damn territory. You sold your souls to the devil. Try to come back here and I'll blast you straight to hell."

McVicar grabbed for his rifle, and Lane whipped up his Colt. Haggarth chirped nervously at his team. His wagon moved. McVicar's wife jerked the rifle from her husband. Tossing it behind her, she grabbed the reins and flapped them. Lane watched till the wagons were well down the road before he holstered his gun.

He felt a momentary satisfaction. He had at least cleared up a few things. Jarvis was after land. He had run off the easy one, had bought off the more stubborn ones. Lane had no doubt but that Jarvis would be at the bank with cash the day those notes came due.

Lane wasn't sure yet whether Jarvis wanted only certain pieces of land, or whether he wanted the whole business. Maybe he now had what he wanted. Or maybe he intended to wreck the town. Then he could pick up land by the square mile, for little or nothing.

Lane had to be sure. He knew he wouldn't find the information in Wild Horse. Swinging the buckskin southeast, he angled to the stage road. He pointed the horse south, then, and gave her her head.

He was barely a mile past the Wilson place when he halted the mare. He wasn't up to a day in the saddle any more. Dismounting painfully, he limped along the road for half a mile, leading the horse. The stiffness and pain finally worked out. Setting his jaw, he swung aboard again.

The stops became more and more frequent along the twenty miles from Wild Horse to Clearwater. But at each halt Lane had time to think, to rearrange his theories and his guesses. He had a clear picture by late afternoon, when he rode into Clearwater.

He picked his way through the town's bustling traffic, and reined up in front of the sheriff's office. Sliding from the saddle, he grabbed for the tie rail to stay on his feet. The leg almost refused to function. He half pulled himself to the boardwalk and into the office, where he collapsed into the nearest chair.

Tom Reed glanced up, then sprang from his desk and crossed to Lane. He was a big, quick-moving man, dressed in the black-and-white clothes of a city lawman. A grin burst across his handsome features as he dragged a chair near Lane.

"Lane Morgan," he said. "You look all stove up."

Lane returned the grin and rubbed his leg. "Just a little tuckered. How's everything?"

Fine," Tom said. "How's the leg?"

"I'll swap you sight unseen."

Tom laughed and, leaning back in his chair, took out a leather case. He passed a cheroot to Lane. Lighting up, he said, "I'm guessing you didn't ride twenty miles just to say howdy. You're still wearing your badge, so you haven't quit. What's up?"

"Looks like trouble in Wild Horse." Lane stretched in the chair and massaged his leg.

"What kind of trouble?"

LANE said, "I want to find out why a man is so all-fired anxious to get hold of some land."

"Is he paying for it?"

"He's scaring more than he's paying. There's nothing against him yet. I figure if I can guess his game, I might find something to throw at him."

"Good boy." Tom stared at the ceiling a moment. "What kind of land?"

"Some bottom land. Mostly just good prairie." Briefly then, Lane outlined the happenings of the past two days. Concluding, he said, "My first thought was railroads."

Tom nodded. "Just what I was thinking. But I'd stake my badge that there's nothing doing."

"You know this country," Lane said. "Any mineral deposits, or anything that might make those farms extra valuable?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then it must be railroads."

Tom's brow furrowed. "That amounts to cheap land, if he can pick up those notes. Maybe he wants to farm."

"He's not the farming type."

"An investment? Saloonkeepers are like gamblers and cowboys. Never knew one who wasn't putting by for a spread of his own."

Lane puffed a smoke ring at the toe of his boot. "Maybe. But all he has to do is load his junk in a wagon, move on to a trail town or silver camp, and he's rich."

"Maybe you just hit it," Tom said. "Why hasn't this jasper pulled out?"

"My guess is a railroad. That land'd sure be worth a heap."

Tom stood and grinned. "Lane Morgan, you don't look fit for shooting. Go on over to the Chisholm Hotel and get some rest. Tomorrow you'll feel more like figuring things out. And meanwhile I'll do some talking about railroads."

"Okay," Lane said, "as soon as I take care of my horse."

Once settled in the hotel room, Lane dropped off to sleep almost immediately. When he awoke it was nearly noon. He sat up shakily, and pain knifed his leg. Hobbling to the wash stand, he shaved and dressed. He took the steps stiff-legged, one at a time. The lobby clock showed eleven-thirty. It took him five minutes to convince a waiter that he wanted breakfast.

"You must've been dead," a voice boomed behind him.

He glanced up as Tom Reed slid onto the opposite chair. The sheriff laughed. "Man, you more than slept the clock around."

Lane finished his eggs and bacon while Tom ordered dinner. Then he asked, "What'd you find out?"

"Nothing doing," Tom said. "The Santa Fe has no notion of running a line anywhere near Wild Horse. And the Kansas Pacific isn't coming south."

"Then what's he after?" Lane said. "It doesn't make sense."

Tom leaned back while the waiter put a plate of beef stew in front of him. Then he said, "Lane, I'm afraid that's what you've got to figure out. Do you want some help?"

"No," Lane snapped, bristling. Coloring, then, he grinned and said, "Sorry, Tom. Guess I'm kind of proddy. I mean, no thanks."

"Stay over another day or two," Tom said. "If we talk it out, maybe we can come up with something."

"Thanks again. But this is Saturday. That means the boys from the Circle B will hit Wild Horse tonight. I'd better be there."

"Been having trouble?"

"No, but you never can tell — especially now." Lane stood and extended his hand. "Anyhow, thanks, Tom."

"Sure," Tom said. "And don't worry about this, Lane. If anybody can clear it up, you're the one to do it. I'll stake my badge on it." He thumped Lane's shoulder. "You let me know."

"Okay," Lane said.

HE HURRIED out and crow-hopped up the street. He found the mare stomping impatiently. Saddling quickly, he rode through town. Tom Reed waved from the hotel porch, and yelled something about Saturday. But the mare broke into a gallop then, and Lane couldn't make out the words. Riding hard, he covered six miles before he had to stop.

The leg was a nuisance. He strode irritably along the road, muttering at the delay. The more he thought about it, the more concern

he felt. Aaron Jarvis hadn't hesitated to tangle with the farmers. If it would further his purpose—whatever that might be—he'd rile the cowboys at the first opportunity.

Then the jolt of an idea halted Lane in his tracks. Thoughtfully, he swung aboard the mare. Jarvis had a good building in Wild Horse; that was why he hadn't left long before. Now those deserted farms would provide rich grazing, far better than the rough land of the Circle B. There could be two, three times as many cattle per acre.

With the town already spooked, panic could follow easily. Jarvis had only to invest a few bottles of whisky. The cowboys would hooraw the town, respectable citizens would flee, and within a month Jarvis would have himself a hard-living cowtown.

A cold fist of fear knotted Lane's belly. He slapped the mare's rump and pushed her to a lope. His leg ached, then throbbed, then flamed with pain. The pounding saddle, the blazing sun, sapped him, bled life from him. He clung to the saddlehorn until he swayed with dizziness. Dismounting, he fell. He grabbed a stirrup and pulled himself up.

Again he mounted and rode until he was exhausted. Again he walked, then rode, then walked, then rode. With Wild Horse in sight, he rolled from the saddle. Dimly he saw that he had stopped near a deserted farm. He shook his head. Peering closer, he recognized the McVicar place.

Again he shook his head. Leaning against the mare, he stared in disbelief. It had to be the McVicar place. But it couldn't be. The barn had been burned. The privy and a toolshed were upset. Every window in the house had been smashed. A porch post was gone, and the roof sagged drunkenly.

Lane limped into the yard. He searched only a minute before he found the prints of those new boots. Then he could only gaze helplessly around him. He wondered about the methods of Aaron Jarvis. Some rancher would have paid well for that barn.

Lane held the buckskin to a walk the last two miles to town; otherwise he could never have stayed aboard. A dipping sun announced supper time, and the odors from kitchens he passed reminded Lane of his own hunger. Riding to the stable, he was aware that the town was closing down much too early for a Saturday.

He took care of the buckskin, reviving slightly. Then got to the boardwalk and dragged himself along it. Ahead of him, a door opened. He saw the dim shape of an albino buffalo.

"What've you been up to?" Doc Sanders said. "Man, you look done in."

Lane smiled weakly. "It's a long way to Clearwater."

Doc took Lane's arm and half dragged him to the hotel. Easing him to a chair in the dining room, Doc said, "Eat. Then sleep. That's doctor's orders. You have to be in better shape than this for tomorrow."

"Tonight," Lane said. "Sundays are quiet here."

Doc laughed. "You missed somewhere. Tomorrow's Saturday."

Lane cradled his head on his arms. He had pushed too hard—and needlessly. Tom had said something about sleeping more than around the clock. Somehow Lane had tried to skip a day.

Food came, and he ate. Dazedly, he climbed the stairs. If this were Friday, then he had some time. There were things to figure out, to think about.

Then a black curtain of fog pressed down on him.

Long afterward, a banging hammered in Lane's ears. He pulled up the covers and turned over. The banging came again. He stirred, came half awake. He heard Cathy calling his name. Shoving up, he shook his head and leaped from bed. He was almost to the door before he discovered that he was stark naked.

"Cathy?" he called, grabbing clothes, pulling them on.

"Lane, hurry," she cried. "The whole town's gone crazy."

He got shirt and pants on and yanked the door open. Cathy stared at his bare feet, his rumpled hair. Fear lined her face, pinched up her eyes. She took an impulsive step forward, and Lane moved to meet her. Then her gaze locked with his. Stepping back, she held herself stiffly.

"This isn't a social call," she said. "There's trouble."

LANE shrugged and turned back into the room. Only then did he realize that somebody had replaced his dirty clothes with clean ones, had undressed and bathed him, had put him to bed.

Sitting, pulling on socks and boots, he asked, "What's going on?"

"It's a run on the bank," Cathy said, moving into the doorway. "Somebody started rumors about the bank, and about you."

"About me?" Lane stood and strapped on his gun. "Let's go."

Cathy ran down the stairs. Lane followed, limping, crow-hopping to keep up. He became aware quickly that rest had eased his leg pains.

Turning onto the boardwalk, he saw the crowd in front of the bank. People pounded at windows, at the door, yelling for money. There was a deep belligerance in their voices. And as faces swung to Lane, he read panic and hysteria in them.

A storekeeper swung a rifle over his head, aiming the butt at the bank's window. Lane lurched forward. He seized the man and spun him around.

"What do you think you're doing?" Lane demanded.

The crowd swiveled to him, then, and the storekeeper cried, "The bank's busted. Those farmers pulled out owing money, and the bank's going broke."

"That's right," a woman yelled, ducking her head, shoving toward the doors. "We've got to get our money."

The mob tightened against her, stopped her, pitched her back. She stumbled. Crying out, she sat down hard. Another woman screeched. A man shouted. The glass of the bank door shattered.

"Stop it!" Lane roared.

He flung the storekeeper aside and shouldered into the mob. Shouting them down, shoving, elbowing, he bulled his way to the bank door. He reached through the broken glass and flipped the lock. As the door swung open, he turned.

"Stand back," he yelled. "The first one of you — man, woman or child — who tries to come in here, gets a bullet."

Still facing the door, he backed inside until he came even with Clegg's desk. From the corner of his eye he saw the white-faced banker sitting there. A shotgun lay across the desk.

"Are you going bust?" Lane asked.

"If this keeps up, yes." Clegg glanced to the door. "But, technically, the bank's position is unchanged. The first of those notes isn't due till next month. The last has six months to run."

"Then there's no immediate danger?" Lane asked.

"As it stands, no. Not if those people will stop this carrying on."

"Somebody just started a lot of wild talk."

"That's how these things usually start."

Lane moved back to the door and faced the muttering crowd. "All right," he yelled. When they quieted, he said, "The bank is not going broke. The only thing that can wreck it is hysteria like this. Now clear out of here and go on about your business."

A few people nearest him avoided his gaze. They turned and began moving away. But near the back of the crowd a man shouted, "I aim to get my money."

His neighbors nodded determined agreement. A murmuring ran through the crowd. Abruptly, people surged forward. Lane gripped both sides of the door.

"What's your trouble?" he yelled.

"I say the bank isn't safe," the man in back answered. "We're fools to stash our money here. Suppose some jasper decides to rob the bank. Who's gonna stop him — a crippled deputy?"

"Clear out!" Lane bellowed.

Hunching, he slammed into the crowd, plowing a path through to the rear. The loudmouthed whiner backed away. Lane recognized him as Ed Brady from the mercantile.

"We want a deputy," Brady said. "Half a man isn't enough."

Lane leaped at him. He grabbed a handful of Brady's shirt.

"Lane," Cathy called, "wait."

Lane turned, releasing Brady. He saw Cathy moving slowly along the path he had cleared. With each step, she fixed some member of the mob in a gaze of pitiless disgust. She halted beside Lane at the edge of the boardwalk.

"Half a man," she said contemptuously,

eyeing the people individually. "How many of you men with two good legs could have done what Lane just did?"

"Sure," Brady said. "He can get real tough with women and businessmen. What if we were bank robbers?"

WHIRLING, Lane snatched the man's hat and flung it into the air. His right hand flicked down, up. His Colt bucked. The hat darted up like a frightened bird. Again and again the gun roared. The flying hat pitched and dipped. Finally the gun clicked empty. Every eye in the crowd watched the hat float to the dust of the street.

"You ruined my hat," Brady wailed.

"Yeah," Lane said, and the next time I shoot at it I hope you're wearing it." He pivoted and faced the mob. "Now clear out of here. In just ten seconds I'm going to start arresting rioters."

For an instant the crowd hesitated. Then people bolted in every direction. Cathy laid a hand on Lane's arm.

"Thanks," she said warmly. "But I'm sorry I had to get you out of bed."

"Don't waste your sympathy," Lane snapped, jerking his arm free. "Remember? I might start feeling sorry for myself."

"Lane—"

He spun away and limped up the boardwalk, shucking shells and reloading his gun. Before he reached the hotel he knew he had acted like a child. But it was too late to turn back.

He climbed the stairs and went to his room. Peeling off his shirt, he finished what he hadn't had time for before. He washed, shaved, and got his tangle of sandy hair combed. Then he went downstairs for breakfast.

Somehow food failed to settle the uneasy twinge in Lane's belly. An unseen, unknown dread needled him. Breakfast lay in his stomach like a cannonball. He went to his office. Alternately he crouched in his chair and paced the squeaking boards, tension tightening his leg. Bit by bit, the picture began to clear.

Only Aaron Jarvis, presiding over his bar, could have so quickly spread bad talk about the bank. The railroad possibility had been disproved. That left two others. Either Jarvis wanted to wreck Wild Horse—which, considering his business interests, seemed unlikely—or he wanted to drive out farmers and open the land to ranchers.

For a long time Lane sat staring at the bare walls, rubbing his leg. Finally there seemed nothing to do but talk to Jarvis. He stood and looked at the clock. Already it was mid-afternoon. Before long the pokes from the Circle B would hit town. He had to move.

Pain throbbed in his leg as he limped up the boardwalk and into the Dusty Trail. Jarvis stood behind the bar, polishing glasses for the night's business. He ignored Lane for a moment. But deep in his black eyes glinted a grim satisfaction.

"Those new boots of yours leave quite a track," Lane said, propping elbows on the bar. "You must've had yourself a lot of fun out at the McVicar place."

"Yeah."

"I wonder," Lane mused, "if Clegg'd like to bring charges against you for destruction of property."

"Ha." Jarvis put down a glass and flipped the towel across his shoulder. "That place still belongs to McVicar. Clegg hasn't any say till the note comes due."

"Maybe I ought to throw you in the calaboose for disturbing the peace," Lane said. "That'd hold you till I rode out to bring those wagons back. I could keep you locked up for six months."

Once more rage blazed in the saloonkeeper's eyes. He spit his words through bared teeth. "Try it, cripple, and I'll kill you. Maybe you can buffalo those yellow-bellied storekeepers, but you don't scare me worth a damn."

"But you scare me," Lane said, smiling. Then he paused, amazed at himself. For the first time he hadn't blown up when somebody mentioned his game leg. He said, "Jarvis, I don't go out of my way looking for trouble. I try to avoid it—for myself and for the town. So if a farm town doesn't suit you, why don't you go find a cowtown?"

"Maybe I'm tired of moving," Jarvis said, a corner of his mouth curling. "Maybe I'm here to stay."

Lane's smile faded. He caught Jarvis's

gaze and held it. He said, "And maybe I'm running out of patience. You started that run on the bank. You started the talk about the crippled deputy. Now I'm telling you you'd better start keeping your mouth shut."

"What'll you do if I don't?" Jarvis taunted.

"Wait and see," Lane said, smiling again. "Do you know the charge for inciting a riot? I could put you away for a year."

"Then why don't you?" Jarvis growled. He pushed his face close to Lane's. "Why don't you do something, instead of just standing there yapping about it?"

LANE shook his head. "I don't want to lock you up for just six months—or even a year. I don't know what your game is, but I'm going to let you play your hand out, and then I'm going to show you what cards I'm holding. We won't be playing penny ante."

"Why, you lousy cripple," Jarvis roared. "If you were even half a man, I'd take you apart with my bare hands. Now get out of here."

Lane grinned, shrugged, and yawned in Jarvis's face. Then he turned slowly and ambled out. But, outside, he hurried to his office. He had to figure out what he'd done.

Slumping into his chair, Lane went back over the scene. He hadn't scared Jarvis, but he hadn't hoped to. Neither had he cracked the man's confidence. If anything, Jarvis was more sure of himself than ever. He was mad enough now to bull his way through whatever plan he had.

But what was the plan? Lane had the uncomfortable feeling of holding a cribbage hand, while everybody else was playing poker. He was certain of only two things, that Jarvis was trying to pull off some monstrous thing, and that Jarvis had wrecked the Wilson and McVicar places.

The idea jelled suddenly and boosted Lane up from his chair. If Jarvis had wanted a cowtown, he wouldn't have torn up those farm houses. He'd have left them for some rancher. What he really wanted was to wreck the town. Tom Reed had hit upon that when he asked why Jarvis hadn't pulled out for a cowtown or mining camp a long time ago.

But why? Why? Lane paced restlessly, then sat, kneading his leg. Why, why, why? He glanced again and again to the clock. The afternoon was speeding past, and Lane was no nearer a solution.

Finally he went to the hotel and put away a meal. But a full stomach neither calmed him nor aided his thinking. He paced the hotel lobby for awhile, then limped out on the boardwalk. Already the sun dipped toward the mountains in the west.

Lane turned toward Main Street. The sound of hard-pushed horses stopped him. Facing west again, he heard yells and hoots. The pounding hoofs burst suddenly upon the town. Twenty cowhands from the Circle B swept down Trail Street. With howls of delight, they leaped from their horses and swarmed into the Dusty Trail.

Hurrying to the corner, Lane turned up Main. He stopped at Doc's, but the door was locked. He banged the door, but nobody stirred. He turned away almost frantically. Then he knew. He had to go to the Cleggs.

He left Main and crow-hopped down the short side street. He had the gate open before he saw Cathy sitting on the front porch. Abruptly, Jarvis faded from his mind, and bittersweet thoughts came crowding in. With a pang, he remembered his own cutting words, just that morning. He remembered what Cathy had said, and he realized the childishness of his sensitivity. Suddenly he knew that she had been right. In her warmth and sympathy, she had understood him better than he had himself.

Haste drained out of him. He closed the gate and limped slowly to the porch. Rising from her chair, Cathy met him at the steps. In the warm twilight, she seemed almost to glow with tenderness. He wanted to throw himself at her feet and beg forgiveness.

"Hello, Lane."

"Cathy," he said, "I guess you ironed out some of my wrinkles, even if I didn't know you were doing it."

"You were just a little mixed up."

"Well, I came to apologize."

SHE came down the last step, slid her arms around his neck, and kissed him. Then she stepped back. Smiling, she said, "We can go on with that discussion later. But you

didn't come here to apologize."

Lane shook his head, and forced his mind to go back and pick up the loose ends. He said, "I came to see your father."

"He's still at the bank," Cathy said. "He wanted to go over everything to see how we stood."

"Maybe I can catch him there."

"Can I help?"

Lane regarded her for a moment. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe you can tell me why Aaron Jarvis wants to ruin this town."

"What do you mean?" Cathy asked, frowning.

"You knew about those farm buildings being torn up?"

"Yes."

"Aaron Jarvis did it." Lane sat down on the top step and pulled Cathy beside him. He said, "I remember my first impression of the McVicar place after Jarvis finished—desertion. What'll scare homesteaders and newcomers away from a place faster than anything?"

"A deserted, run-down bunch of farm or ranch buildings."

"Right. And which way do new folks come into Wild Horse?"

Cathy thought for a moment. "Those with wagons come over the trail from the east. The others come by stage from Clearwater."

"Right again. The Haggarth place is to the east. Wilson and McVicar are south. People coming one way or the other couldn't help getting the feeling of failure from this country. No amount of talk after they get to town would change their minds."

"Aaron Jarvis," Cathy breathed. She stiffened and said, "Then he's the one who started the trouble this morning."

"You're still right." Lane shook his head. "But why does he want to ruin this town?"

Cathy laid a hand on Lane's arm, and a heavy sadness weighed her face. "It's not the town. It's us—Daddy and me."

"What?"

"Think over it," Cathy said. "The town is only secondary. Everything Aaron has done has been aimed primarily at the bank—the farmers moving out, leaving mortgages, the run on the bank, the talk that you were unfit to guard the bank, those deserted farms. Why, if new people did come, they'd buy other land before they'd take on failures."

"You mean Jarvis is ruining the town just to get at the bank?"

"Something like that."

"But why? Why?"

Cathy gripped Lane's arm tighter, and a shiver ran through her. "Aaron used to call on me. I didn't like him. He seemed—well, there was something about him—something evil. I didn't want to be rude. I guess he thought I was encouraging him. Finally Daddy had to run him off. Daddy never did like the idea of a saloon in town anyway. He said he wouldn't have his daughter associating with the likes of Aaron."

"I think I see it," Lane said. "Jarvis took it personally, just like I took those cracks about my leg."

"Yes."

"In a way you were lucky. Some men would have come back with a gun and shot your dad and—I hate to think."

"Then this is his way of getting even. He wants to ruin Daddy."

"That," Lane said, "or he wanted to break you. Maybe he thought that when you were poor you'd welcome him."

Cathy jumped to her feet, her hands clasped. "But, Lane, it's such a little thing for which to wreck a whole town."

"Love and hate," Lane said, standing beside her, "are the biggest things in the world."

The crackle of gunfire ruptured the evening's stillness. Lane gripped Cathy's arm. He felt her tremble. "Jarvis is playing his ace," Lane said. "You stay here."

He sprang down the steps. Ignoring the pain in his leg, he drove himself to a full run. He vaulted the fence and raced to Main Street, then swung to the crossroads. Drunken cowboys spilled from the saloon.

ALREADY the cowboys filled the street, and a heavy curtain of gunsmoke lay between the rows of buildings. With every gun's roar, a window shattered, a doorknob disintegrated, or a bullet gouged through a building's thin walls. And Lane knew that he must stop it at once, or by morning Wild Horse would be a ghost town.

"Stop it!" he yelled, and stepped into the street.

A cowboy faced him from ten feet away. Weaving, the poke whooped and fired. The bullet kicked dust on Lane's boots. He sprang at the man, wrenched the gun free, and clubbed the wobbling head. With a groan, the cowboy collapsed.

Lane looked to the next nearest man. Then he halted. Too many men waved their guns in his direction. Something was wrong. Then he knew. The bank was still the main objective. If a run on the bank had failed, a robbery wouldn't.

Crouching, torturing his leg, he ran to the bank and kicked the door open. Bullets reached for him as he jumped inside. Clegg sat on the floor near the opened safe, blood trickling across his bare scalp. Lane ran to him.

"Didn't . . . didn't see him," Clegg murmured. "Made me keep my . . . my back turned. Went out. . . ." He waved feebly to a side window.

Lane jumped to the window and through, then to the alley. He caught a glimpse of light as the back door of the saloon closed. He ran to it, his boots silent in the deep dust. Opening it a crack, he saw Jarvis going out the front door empty handed. Lane jerked the door open. A gunny-sack lay in a corner. He grabbed it, glanced at the money, then raced back to the bank.

"Lock it up," he called, throwing the sack through the side window. "Then get down on the floor again." He waited only long enough to see Clegg respond.

Ducking back to the alley, he crossed Main Street and circled wide around, coming into Trail Street again behind the celebrating cowboys. He saw Jarvis strolling toward the bank. The cowpokes wobbled up and down the street, shooting just to hear their guns and the breaking glass.

Lane stepped into the street. Pulling his gun, he stepped behind a man. He jabbed the gun into the man's back, disarmed him. When the poke turned, Lane tossed the gun up the street. It bounced in the dust in front of the saloon.

"When you get it," Lane muttered, see how many bottles and mirrors you can break in Jarvis's place. Otherwise you'll spend the next week in jail."

The cowhand blinked, then turned and staggered up the street. Lane repeated his procedure. He had half the men out of the way before Jarvis got to the bank.

"Robbers!" Jarvis yelled. "Holdup! Somebody robbed the bank."

"What's this?" Lane shouted, stepping into plain sight.

Clegg appeared at the door of the bank. "There's nothing wrong here."

"Jarvis, you sidewinder," Lane shouted. "You tried to frame these ranchers."

The drunken punchers gaped at each other. Then the first of the disarmed ones found his gun and Jarvis's plate glass mirrors. Guns roared in the saloon. The punchers on the street howled and headed for the saloon.

Aaron Jarvis ran after them, screaming. Then he halted and turned slowly. Even at that distance Lane could read the complete viciousness in that dark face. Jarvis stepped into the street, clawing for a gun in his belt.

"Don't do it," Lane called.

"You're yellow," Jarvis yelled, coming closer. "I'm going to prove it."

He came on, then, his gun hand swinging loosely at his side. Laughing, he halted and brought the gun up. Once more Lane's hand flicked. The Colt bucked and roared just once. Jarvis rocked back; then, cursing, he folded over and nosed into the dirt.

Lane holstered his gun. The pain sharp now, he limped to the bank. Twenty guns cut loose in the saloon. Clegg's mouth worked, but Lane couldn't hear him. He did hear the happy cry, though. He turned, and Cathy ran into his arms.

She tried to speak, but he heard only the bedlam of destruction at the saloon. He just held her and thought of those deserted farms that needed looking after—that needed a man and a woman.

Her arms tightened around his neck and she melted against him. She pulled his head down. As her lips found his, he could no longer hear either shooting or yelling. All he could hear were church bells.

# The DAY the

***FARROW HAD ALREADY stolen the sheriff's girl . . . and now he was working with all his might to ruin the sheriff's reputation***

SERGEANT HERKIMER had arrived in town last night to escort young Cathro, the army deserter, back to Santa Fe for trial. This was why Sheriff Ross Chambers woke that morning with mixed feelings. Although Cathro was still lodged in the Clayton City jail, Herkimer's presence made him officially the Army's prisoner. So Sheriff Chambers was relieved of the responsibility, and was left free to do a certain piece of business he'd had on his mind for some time.

If it wasn't a prisoner in the jail holding up Ross Chambers's resignation, it was something else. But today, with Herkimer here, Ross had his chance to resign. He intended to take it.

Ross poured water into the basin and washed. Melancholy rose in him, and he shook it by reminding himself that next week at this time Harriet Miles would be Mrs. Ross Chambers. After a delay of six years, Ross would be in the cattle business, on the modest ranch his older brother had left him, ten miles from Clayton City.

He finished dressing. His cartridge belt hung on the back of a chair, with the worn walnut handle of the Colt showing in the holster. He eyed it and then left it there. But he did take the six-pointed star from the bureau top and pin it to his shirt. There the badge would stay until he laid it on Mayor Jesse Farrow's desk.

Leaning a big freckled hand on the edge of the bureau, he was too deep in thought to see the man in the mirror. Ross had heavy shoulders, a thickening girth, a hairline that was slightly receding above Irish blue eyes. His face missed being homely by being amiable.

His resignation was going to be news to Mayor Farrow, Ross thought, and Farrow was like a flea. You couldn't tell whether he'd jump right or left. For some reason Farrow had always held animosity for Ross. Ross could not seem to figure out why, though.

He took his hand off the bureau, saw himself in the mirror, and tucked his middle in. His jaw grew faintly formidable. He thought, Herkimer's being here makes Cathro the Army's prisoner, so I'm quitting the office of sheriff legally. Let Farrow try to change my mind.

# Sheriff Quit

*"Harriet, don't you care if people say that I'm a coward?" Ross asked*

By M. E. BRADSHAW

He went briskly down the stairs of the house he'd lived in as sheriff for six years. He couldn't help smiling as, faithful to the last, each stair squeaked in its own key. But the squeaks reminded him he was getting heavy at thirty-five, and it wouldn't do. People would be saying, poor Mrs. Miles, married to that fat, retired sheriff, and the truth of it leavened the humour.

Only Harriet, his mother, and Beck, his orphaned niece, knew this was the day he planned to retire. In the kitchen his mother, frail and gray-haired, lifted the skillet of pork chops from the stove and gave him a sage half smile. But Becky was watching him gleefully. He thought, the little minx! She's too happy about all this. He walked to his place at the table, sat down, and was promptly enveloped in a pair of gingham sleeves.

Becky kissed the thin spot in his hair and said delightedly, "I'm so glad, Uncle Ross!"

He couldn't help smiling but, because he was thinking of Farrow again, he ate his breakfast soberly. Six years ago Farrow had married a girl named Polly Yates—Ross's girl. Ross had been sheriff for four months then.

He finished his coffee, and his chair scraped abruptly on the floor. He got up from the table and took his hat from the peg. Becky's glee gave way to faint worry. He knew why; she wanted to go with him to make sure he really resigned this time. But when he walked into Jesse Farrow's office this morning he was going to be alone.

Still, he couldn't leave Becky long-faced. He said, "You be sure and help your grandmother get things ready for tonight, won't you?" and saw her brighten. The small gathering of friends to celebrate his retirement, and his marriage to Harriet, had been her idea.

"You bet I will, Uncle Ross."

He was at the door when his mother said, "Ross," almost reluctantly.

"Yes?"

"Don't let Farrow stop you."

He stared at her. He wished she hadn't said it, when he was so nearly being through with Farrow. It reminded him that, this one last vital time, Farrow could come out on top again. He left without answering.

He'd promised to call on Harriet on his way to Farrow's office. He felt better when he stood in front of the little house mottled by sun and candlewood leaf; it helped harden his determination that, today of all days, Farrow's smooth ability to reason black into white would get him nowhere. He unfastened the gate, struck by the fitness of the words he'd begun to whistle.

*The master run, ha, ha,*
*The darkies stay, ho, ho,*
*It must be now the Kingdom coming,*
*And the year of Jubilo.*

HARRIET came to meet him. She was small and fair, and pretty this morning in a white cotton blouse and black skirt. He recalled the condition she'd made about marrying him, the out-and-out choice she'd laid down—quit the sheriff's job or there'd be no wedding. Well, his own thoughts on the matter had been long enough; he'd considered quitting many times before.

Partly because of Farrow, partly because she felt she was asking too much of him, concern filled her face. "Are you going now, Ross?"

"I'm going now," he replied.

"Are you sorry?" Harriet asked.

"No, not sorry."

Her mouth tilted in a smile. "I love you."

"And I," Ross said, "love you." They were words he seldom used. He wondered if Polly Yates, his first love, who was now the mayor's wife, would remember when he'd said them to her. He would have liked to tell her, I mean it, Polly, when I say it to Harriet. Just as I meant it for you.

He shouldn't have thought of Polly, because it brought other memories, all unpleasant, all centered on Farrow. He kissed the tip of Harriet's nose and let himself out the gate.

Walking toward the business district, he considered the questions he'd never been able to answer about Farrow. Polly'd been the first thing in Ross's life that Farrow had spoiled. The puma affair typified the others. Flanked by the councilors, Farrow had approached Ross with earnest gravity.

It wasn't, he'd pointed out, as if the puma

were raiding a cattleman's herd, in which case men familiar with guns would soon kill it. But Hogarth, who was being plagued by the puma, was a homesteader, gun-shy to boot, and already he'd lost two calves. Would the sheriff, who was, of course, perfectly within his right to refuse, go out to the Hogarth place and kill the puma?

The truth of the situation had nettled Ross. Not only was Hogarth a tenderfoot, he was simple, and his wife and five children were simple. He couldn't refuse to help a man who couldn't help himself. So he went out to the Hogarth place and killed the puma.

When he got back to town he found a veiled change in people who two days before had told him quite sincerely it was good of him to get Hogarth's puma. It shortened his temper, drew him further into himself because he couldn't ask them the point-blank question, what are you laughing at me for? Why?

He didn't need to ask them, because the answer lay with Farrow. It seemed he'd made a speech in Ross's absence. He'd praised the sheriff's bravery in killing the puma in glowing and witty terms. More witty than glowing, from what Ross could gather. Farrow'd convulsed the crowd. In other words, without giving Ross something he could challenge, Farrow had made a fool of him.

Ross had to admit Mayor Jesse Farrow had done well by Clayton City. The new plank sidewalk under his feet wouldn't have been there if the Farrow Freighting Company hadn't carried the planks from the mill in Tucson at cost. And the run on the bank four years ago that could have wiped it out; he knew the cash that passed through the wickets, long after the bank's own funds were gone, had come from the safe of the Farrow Freighting Company.

Farrow'd sought no glory for it, either. It amounted to his having faith enough in Clayton City's future to back it up with his pocketbook. That, Ross allowed with wry insight, was the one sure test to divide the sheep from the goats.

And Farrow'd never lost his charm; in about another minute Ross would get a dose of it. Ross absently lifted his hat to Isaiah and Lucy Yerby in passing. Isaiah, the minister of the Methodist church, would be marrying Ross to Harriet next week. The Yerbys were among the few who hadn't gone Farrow's way, and it got easier every year to go Farrow's way in Clayton City.

Ross crossed the threshold of the town hall. Farrow's office was the first door to the right. Ross did away with the courtesy, this morning, of giving a light rap on the pane before he walked in.

Mayor Jesse Farrow, distinguished in appearance at thirty-three, immaculate to the last nicety of cravat with diamond stickpin, regarded him from the swivel chair behind the walnut desk with a half quizzical smile. Ross sickened a little knowing the mayor was thinking, did you knock, Sheriff? I didn't hear you.

But Ross was feeling his oats today. He moved an inkwell aside and deliberately lowered a levi-clad hip to the desk. "Morning, Mayor." He reached for his badge, unpinned it, laid it on the desk. "This belongs to you now. I'm resigning as of today."

Farrow's eyes lifted from the star, frankly surprised, faintly thoughtful. But Farrow was always frank, always faintly thoughtful. Ross had no way of telling what he was thinking. He rose from the chair, hand extended.

"Well, Sheriff, this is a surprise. Let me be the first to congratulate you."

"You aren't the first," Ross said, as he shook hands, "but thanks."

Farrow returned to the swivel chair, and began to study him gravely. Ross thought, now he's going to jump.

Farrow said soberly, "Of course, Sheriff, I wouldn't want to keep you in office a day longer than necessary. But have you considered the advisability of resigning when there's a prisoner in your jail?"

ROSS felt the sting, even though he'd known Farrow would seize on that. He could have reminded Farrow that Deputy Sheriff York Hupp was there, but he didn't.

He said shortly, "I have. As you know, Mr. Mayor, Sergeant Herkimer arrived last night to take Cathro back to Santa Fe. They should be leaving some time today."

Farrow cleared his throat. "It's possible, Sheriff. Then again—" he shrugged—"Sergeant Herkimer's been in the saloon since it

opened this morning. Claims it was a long, dry ride from New Mexico; you know how it is. I doubt he'll be in any shape to take charge of Cathro today."

Ross knew what was happening to him, because it had happened before. He leaned on the hand he'd planted in the middle of Farrow's desk. "That's not my lookout, Farrow. Cathro's Herkimer's prisoner now. And if the prisoner stays in the Clayton City jail for an extra day while Herkimer gets drunk, that's a courtesy from the sheriff's office to the Army—and you know it."

Farrow looked alarmed. He came out of the swivel chair to lay a hand on Ross's shoulder. Ross curbed the impulse to knock it away. "My dear fellow! Surely you're not angry." Farrow spread his hands. "I was merely pointing out the situation as it is. If I've offended you, I apologize. Certainly I agree Cathro is the Army's prisoner. But the fact remains—"

Ross interrupted, "The fact remains there's a deputy sheriff in Clayton City, Mr. Mayor. He'll be looking after things, including Cathro, until the new sheriff takes over."

"Of course—Deputy Sheriff Hupp," Farrow said vaguely. "Well, then, the way is clear for me to accept your resignation. Provided, that is, that if any trouble should arise with Cathro, you'll indemnify the mayor and the councilors."

Ross said calmly, "Indemnify, blazes." He got off the desk, walked to the door. "There's not going to be any trouble, Farrow."

He shut the door firmly in Farrow's righteous, resigned face. Cathro, a farm boy from Ohio who'd grown tired of a dog-soldier's life, wasn't even a criminal. He was only a deserter. Ross could even feel sorry for him; he'd get five years at hard labor in Santa Fe.

Outside, Ross tallied one up for himself. The star was in Farrow's hands, and Farrow had jumped the way Ross had thought he would. He'd tried to block Ross's resignation, not because Clayton City might or might not have needed him, but because Farrow'd been robbed. In his own good time, Farrow wanted to pull the strings himself that would put the sheriff out of office.

Ross grinned without humour. He'd beat Farrow to the draw. He'd go tell York now, but York wouldn't be surprised; he'd seen it coming. He walked across the street to the cool adobe-walled jail. York lounged in a chair, shirttail hanging out of his faded levis. He hardly seemed to glance at Ross as he entered, yet his voice held a regretful note.

"You did it."

"Yes." Ross answered. He walked to a chair against the wall, dropped into it. "Farrow didn't like it."

"Good for Farrow."

"I don't know that it is. He's kicking up a fuss about Cathro. Keep an eye on him, will you?"

"On Farrow?" York asked.

"You know who I mean."

"I'll watch him." The deputy sheriff smiled.

"Thanks, York."

He stood up, a little lost now, seeing for the final time the chipped adobe walls, the faded calendar, the scarred rifle rack. He walked to the block of four cells, looked at Cathro sleeping on his bunk, and came back. Well, no use in sticking around; all things considered, he was glad to be out of it.

He held out his hand to York and said, "So long, York. You'll be all right till the new man comes in."

York stood up and took his hand. "Good luck, Ross."

"Thanks." Ross walked out, blinking against the sun in the street, remembering a hundred summer days that had seen blood spilled before the sun went down—sometimes his own blood. All that was behind now; it was over for Sheriff Ross Chambers.

He turned in at Estey's Livery Stable. Lew Estey was a good friend; he would be tickled to know Ross had walked out on Farrow. The fragrance of yellow pine shavings filled the shed, and a head emerged from behind a half-finished carriage.

"Oh, how do, Ross." Lew put the planer down and came briskly around the carriage. "Glad to see you." He halted and a broad leprechaun's grin creased his face. "You old hound dog, you've turned in your badge."

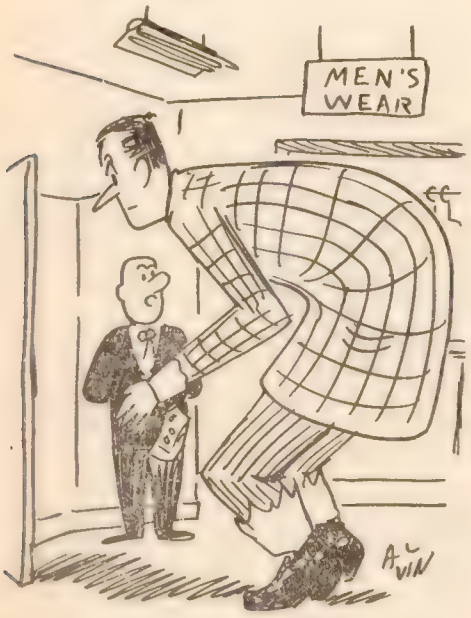
"Yes, I have."

Lew smacked him heartily on the back. "It's about time. You've done enough for this town—more than anybody else has done."

Ross grinned. "I wouldn't put it quite like that, Lew."

Lew gave him a peculiar look. "Thanks to you, Ross, all three of my children will live to be twenty-one. There was a day in this town when I couldn't have said that. We just closed our storm shutters and waited till you made it safe for women and children to go out on the streets."

"I had some good men behind me, Lew."




*"Frankly, sir, we're thankful you're our only customer from Texas."*

Lew said, unconvinced, "Maybe so. Maybe so."

Thoughtfully, Ross asked Lew a question he'd asked before. "Lew, what do you make of Farrow?"

"Same thing I've always made of him."

It had never rung true to Ross. It didn't now. "No, it can't be that. There must be something else."

Lew said stubbornly, "I tell you, there isn't. I'm right."

"That Farrow is jealous of me? I don't believe it."

"You figure it out," Lew said. "Six years ago you and Farrow arrived in Clayton City within a month of each other. Farrow was educated, he even had enough money to get his business on a paying basis without dirtying his own hands too much. You had nothing, except the backbone to pin on the sheriff's star when nobody else would.

"Never mind the gents with the tied-down guns; even the cowboys riding into town on Saturday nights and shooting up all the glass they could find had the town scared stiff. Farrow would have liked to be the man who told them to put up or shut up. But what he wanted most, he didn't have. You had it. And he had to settle for running for mayor. I tell you, Ross, he hates you for that."

"And I say," Ross said heavily, "it isn't reason enough for knifing me in the back every chance he's had for six years."

LEW asked bluntly, "Why do you think he married Polly?"

"I'm still asking myself, Lew."

"I'll tell you. He set out to prove that a man's ability to fight isn't everything, that there are other ways of getting what you want. He started by marrying Polly. I don't think he wanted her, Ross. He married her to show you he could."

Ross said slowly, "He apologized plenty for taking her away from me. I began to think he was the sorriest man West of the Missouri. Do you know something, Lew? I think so still."

Lew said carefully, "I saw Polly yesterday. She had an awfully high colour. She was tipsy."

"No!"

It had been a painful business for Ross to get over loving her, but he'd never wished unhappiness on her. So she was finding out, too, there were one or two cracks in Farrow's polished exterior.

He turned to go. Raking over old coals was no good. Lew clapped him on the shoulder, then leaned in the doorway watching him go down the street. A true Yankee, Lew was, quick-witted and shrewd, but he wasn't right about Farrow. No, there had to be a better reason for Farrow's patiently, deliberately turning a whole town against Ross.

Well, he was through with Farrow now,

and it gave Ross a good, satisfying feeling. He walked home briskly and found Harriet standing guard in the hall.

She said, "You aren't to go into the kitchen. Becky's doing something you aren't to see," and took him by the hand firmly.

Becky's voice floated from the kitchen. "Did you resign, Uncle Ross?"

"Yes."

Elated giggles followed them out to the porch. They sat on the front steps, beside the paloverde bush, and Ross's hound trotted from somewhere and stretched out at his feet. Then Ross saw the movement beyond the paloverde bush.

He wondered why his blood should chill, when it happened exactly as he'd known it would—three men coming into sight, coated formally, mopping perspiring brows, grave, business-like. Farrow, a councilor on either side, beaver hat in hand, opened the gate and came up the walk, halting as the hound came menacingly to life.

His eyes lifted from the dog to Ross. Ross wished he had a dollar for every time he'd seen that look on Farrow's face, the slightly pained look of a man forced into an unpleasant duty. He stood up, the better to fend it off.

"Sheriff, we feel that, in view of Cathro's being in the jail, your resignation comes at a most inopportune time. We're here to make the request that you withhold the resignation for another twenty-four hours."

Ross asked coldly, "Do you realize you're insulting York Hupp?"

"We grant the ability of Deputy Sheriff Hupp. But we would prefer to accept your resignation tomorrow, when we presume Cathro will be gone."

Ross looked from Farrow to the two councilors. It was reasonable enough; one day was neither here nor there. But he knew that, as far as Farrow was concerned, tomorrow would be no different from today.

"No," he said.

Farrow rested a foot on the bottom step. "Are you sure, Sheriff, you want your refusal written into the record? Because it will be, you know. This matter is official."

The veiled hint galled Ross. So Cathro was going to escape, because Ross refused to delay his resignation. That he saw right through the scheme didn't cool him off. Farrow didn't give a whoop for the record, or probably Cathro either. The unpardonable act to him was Ross's quitting of his own free will.

He said, "No, Farrow. I'm not coming back. I mean it."

Farrow shrugged, and spread his hands to the councilors. "You heard, gentlemen. There's nothing more to be said." He led the trio to the gate.

When they had disappeared behind the paloverde bush, Harriet asked uncertainly, "You won't go back, will you, Ross?"

"Of course not."

His own words haunted him through the afternoon and into the evening, until the doorbell began to ring with the arrival of the handful of people who'd been invited to the celebration. He wished York could have been there, lanky and bashful in a store-bought suit, but York was keeping Cathro company. He hoped Sergeant Herkimer had started to taper off drinking.

Five minutes after the last guests arrived, Becky carried a huge cake into the parlor. It was splendid with candles and frosting. Ross's smile vanished as he read the lettering on it. *Best wishes, Ross and Harriet, from your friends.* It was the "friends" part that made words stick in his throat.

Isaiah Yerby's laughter boomed out at the look on his face. "Speech, speech!"

Ross fumbled with his watch chain and tried to think of something. Finally he said, "I can't make a speech and you know it. But thank you, everybody, for being here, and you'll sure be more than welcome out at the ranch any time you like."

Everybody laughed and talked at once. Lew whacked Ross on the back and Isaiah said he'd have the biggest congregation in town if he kept his sermons that short. In the midst of it, Ross heard hoofbeats pounding down the street. He knew they were going to stop in front of the house, and when they did a hush fell on the parlor.

Becky ran to the window, but it was dark outside and the quick striding footsteps were coming up the walk before she announced in a strained voice, "It's Mr. Farrow."

Ross's mother answered the doorbell's brisk, nervous ring. Her voice gave no hint of her considered opinion of Farrow as it drifted into the parlor.

"Good evening, Mr. Mayor. Come in."

FARROW didn't wait to be shown into the parlor. He burst in, and Ross knew his ashen color was real. He blurted, "Sheriff Chambers, I'm sorry to break in on you like this, but Cathro has escaped."

Ross's first impulse not to believe it died swiftly. Stunned, he voiced the first words that came to mind. "*What?* How?"

"He had a gun. He got the drop on York and locked him in the cell. The barber-shop proprietor heard York shouting and let him out. York's gone after him."

"Is Cathro afoot?"

"No. He took a horse in front of the jail." Farrow turned from Ross to the other people in the room. "This is most unfortunate. I know you're gathered here tonight to honor Sheriff Chambers on his retirement and his coming marriage. Since you are his close friends, you know better than I do that he is not a man who needs to be shown his duty." He extened his hand, palm up, to Ross.. "Here's your badge of office, Sheriff."

Ross could hear the tick of the grandfather's clock in the hall. One second, two. He took the star, turned his back on the faces in the parlor, climbed the stairs. In his room he took off his coat, put on his leather perkin, pinned the star to it. His cartridge belt hung where he'd left it. He was buckling it on when a crinoline rustled behind him.

Harriet said from the doorway, "I want to marry a man who will live to be eighty. Will you be alive tomorrow morning, Ross?"

Ross felt the tug of imptatience. "I can't do anything different, Harriet. Can't you see that?"

"I see that if you go now, Ross, you'll go again—whenever Farrow tells you to go."

He realized that she really believed it. He said shortly, "Nonsense," and reached for his sweat-stained Stetson. He clumped down the hall and paused at the top of the stairs. "Harriet, do you mean to say you wouldn't care if people said I was scared to go out and get Cathro?"

She set her jaw. "No, I wouldn't care!"

He said quietly, "Well, I do," and started down the stairs.

Harriet leaned over the bannister. "Ross, I won't be here when you get back!"

He halted, boots planted, one hand on the stair rail. Anger washed through him. "Don't be foolish, Harriet!"

He watched her face mirror anger too, mixed with surprise and then with finality, before her head and shoulders vanished. Her slippered feet flew noiselessly up the carpeted hall, and the door to Becky's room slammed hard.

He went downstairs, cussing silently. He walked past Farrow, past the open parlor door, through the kitchen and out to the stable. He saddled his horse, shoved his rifle into the saddle boot. He told himself Harriet didn't mean it, that she'd simply been trying to keep him from going. Yet he couldn't shake the still, small feeling that she did mean it.

Ross met York about five miles from town, with a subdued Cathro in tow. He pulled up and waited until York came abreast of him. "What happened?"

York said shortly, "It was my fault. I didn't have my gun when I took him a pot of coffee. I sure didn't expect him to have one."

"How did he get the gun?" Ross asked.

York gave the sheriff an oddly direct look. "Somebody gave it to him."

Ross was satisfied Cathro hadn't had so much as a toothpick on him when he'd been placed in the cell two days before. This, then, had to be the truth. "Did Lathro see whoever it was that gave him the gun?"

"He says not, except that he knew it was a man. This man came round in back of the jail at sunset and called Cathro by name. He kept himself down below the window ledge. Cathro didn't know what was up, and reached out and grabbed in case the fellow did have a gun. He could have saved himself the trouble. It was all ready for him in the fellow's hand." He glanced sideways at Ross. "Any ideas?"

"Not a one. You?"

York said quietly, "Farrow."

"Farrow, my eye," Ross said wearily. "He wouldn't risk his own neck to put a rope

around mine. He hasn't got the gumption. Besides, he's too smart to pull a trick like that."

York said without enthusiasm, "Guess you're right."

Ross thumbed the star on his jerkin. "York," he said softly, "there's a fat-headed fool riding in my saddle. This was all Farrow wanted—an excuse to give me back the star so he could fire me. And I couldn't take it back fast enough. I played right into his hands." He squared around in the saddle and looked at Cathro who was standing with his head down, shoulders hunched. "Well, that's that."

It was midnight when they reached town. A light burned in the mayor's office across the street from the jail, which didn't surprise Ross. Farrow would be waiting, pained and apologetic, to relieve the sheriff of his duties. He'd have the councilors with him. Before that happened Ross wanted to satisfy himself by having a look at the ground in back of the jail.

York lit the lantern, and Ross put Cathro back in the cell. He was closing the door when he noticed the blood from a scratch on Cathro's hand. "How did you get that, boy?"

"Stuck myself," said Cathro.

"On what?"

"I dunno. Something on the fellow that gave me the gun."

ROSS said softly, "Do tell," and thought hard before he moved away to take down a lantern.

The ground behind the jail was barren except for a scattering of weeds. He bent over and looked closer. The loose earth appeared furrowed, and some of the weeds were crushed as if, Ross mused, somebody had been down on their hands and knees looking for something. He wondered if they'd found it. Well, there was one way to try and find out.

He put the lantern on the ground and got down on all fours. Methodically he began to sift the loose earth. Ten minutes later something glittered up at him from the palm of his hand. He hunkered back on his heels, shoved his hat back, and spent a full minute marveling at his own underestimation of one man. Several men in Clayton City were wealthy enough to sport diamond stickpins, but none of them matched the size and brilliance of Mayor Jesse Farrow's.

He put it in his pocket, picked up the lantern, and went into the jail. He said briefly to York, "I'm going to the mayor's office. I won't be long."

He crossed the street and his entrance into the mayor's office halted Farrow's pacing. "Come in, Sheriff. I want to talk to you."

Ross closed the door. He took the stickpin from his pocket, put it on the desk and said drily, "Everybody in town can identfy it."

Farrow sprawled across the desk in his lunge to get the stickpin. Ross whisked it up, caught him by the collar, and flung him into the swivel chair. The chair overturned and took Farrow with it, but Ross didn't wait for him to get up.

"Lew Estey was right about you, Farrow. I was willing to give you credit for having a better reason for hating me, but there isn't one. You'd have hated any man who put on the guns you wanted to wear. It wasn't enough for you to take Polly away from me; you had to keep at me until you finished me. But you didn't finish me, Farrow. It's the other way around."

Farrow pushed the chair away and started to get up. "Never mind," Ross told him. "I'm not going to turn you in. Your stickpin's going into a little box, and the box is going to the bank vault—in my name. Think of that, Farrow. Why at any time I might take the notion to dig it out of the vault and spill the beans. You may be a big man some day. If people don't mind a little sham, you might even get to be governor."

Farrow had gotten to his feet. Ross said, "No one else is going to know what's in the box in the vault, Farrow—not even York or Harriet. Just you and me, for the rest of our lives." He eyed the stickpin before he put it in his pocket. "So that's why you were a little upset when you came to the house tonight. You knew this was lying on the ground outside Cathro's cell, but you came anyhow. That took nerve, Farrow. Real nerve."

He walked to the door. Then he remembered the star. He walked back, unpinned it, and laid it on the walnut desk. He'd said what went with it once today; that was

enough. He left without troubling to close the door behind him.

He glanced regretfully across the street toward the jail. He'd give York some satisfaction, but not the whole truth. It would be as he'd told Farrow; not even Harriet would know. His boots took him briskly in the direction of her house. Lamplight still glowed from the parlor window. He took the steps two at a time, rapped on the door, and went in.

He saw through the bedroom door that she was packing. He leaned against the doorjamb and watched her. She knew he was there; each dress went into the suitcast more violently than the last. He couldn't help grinning.

Ross entered the room.

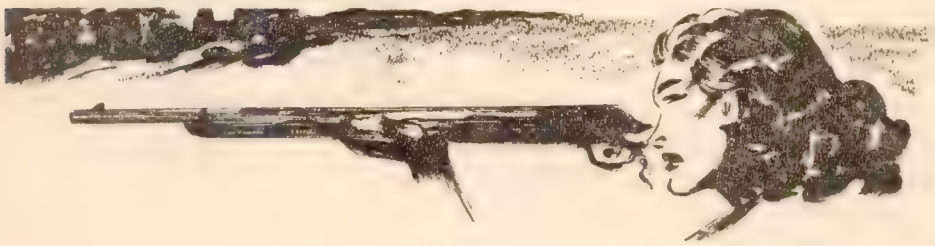
He said, "Here, let me help you." He picked up the suitcase and emptied the contents on the bed.

She turned around, and she was, he saw, very angry. He took her face between his hands. "I quit again, Harriet, for good. I'm never going back."

"You said that before, but you went back. You'll go again. I know you will."

"No, I won't. Farrow hated me a little too much, Harriet. He trapped himself." He couldn't hide his triumph; it was too sweet to be hidden after a long, losing battle. He said gently, "I can't tell you very much about it. It's between Farrow and me, and that's the way it has to be. You'll just have to trust me, Harriet. Do you trust me?"

He waited through a long and searching look, and read his answer in her smile before his arms pulled her close.



*Coming in the next issue*

## BLIZZARD TRAIL

***Everyone in the valley depended on Farraday . . . not t***
***that his life could be snuffed out by a***

**A Magazine-Length Nov**

**By GIFF CHESHIR**

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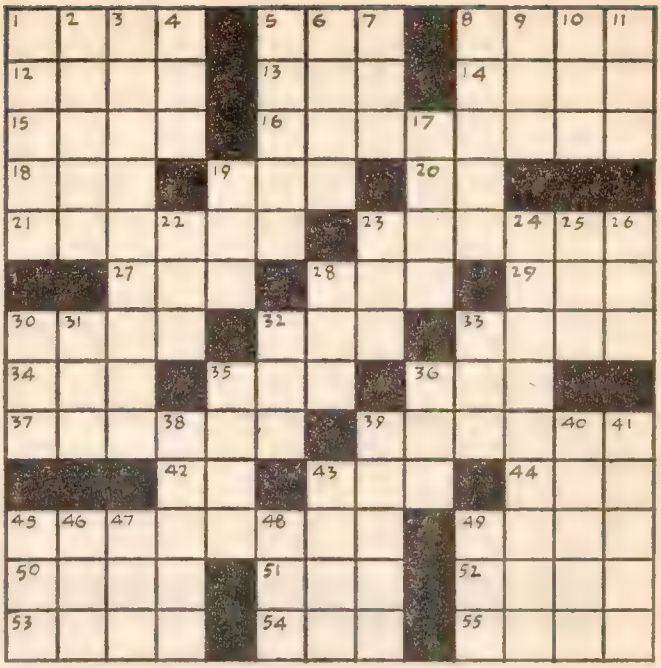
## GUN IN HIS HA

***Will Vance's new partner would be no h***
***land . . . and his wife was too beautiful***

**Beginning an Exciting Seri**

**By JACK BARTON**

# THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



*The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue*

ACROSS

1 Papa's mate
5 Boy
8 Engrossed
12 Absent
13 Lyric poem
14 Oleomargarine
15 To talk wildly
16 Cream-colored horse
18 Before
19 Stitched edge
20 Daddy
21 World —— in baseball
23 Texas mounted policeman
27 Tavern
29 Beam of light
30 Short nail
32 Drinking vessel
33 Positive
34 Noah's boat
35 Baseball club
36 Curved bone
37 Western squatter
39 Western burrowing animal
42 Either
43 Crowd
44 Half of two
Cowboy
An Easterner out West
50 To conceal
51 East-southeast (abbr.)
52 Utilized
53 Betting quotation
Father
Places to sleep

DOWN

1 Female horses
2 Conscious
3 Unbranded calves
4 Affirmative vote
5 Gallops easily
6 First man
7 Delaware (abbr.)
8 Native of Rome
9 —— Baba
10 Writing tool
11 Also
17 Lustrous gem
19 Egg producer
22 Writing fluid
23 To tear
24 Cowboys' eating place
25 Organ of hearing
26 Bread grain
28 Not in
30 Light brown
31 Exist.
32 Automobile
33 To drink slowly
35 Short for "iceberg"
36 To steal from
38 Musical sounds
39 Pierced with horns
40 Finished
41 Coarse grasses
43 Western plateau
45 Which person
46 Free of
47 To sum up
48 Guided
49 Unskillful player (sl.)

*"Your leg hurts pretty bad, doesn't it, Dan?" Ellie asked*

# Serenade in Lead

*By Ray G. Ellis*

ELLIE called out, "Cooky, I thought you'd left with all the rest."

Dan Higgins looked up from the soapy water he'd just thrown outside the cook shack. "No, Miss Ballard," he said. "I thought I'd stay on, that is if it's all right."

The worry lines around Ellie Ballard's eyes deepened as she frowned. "But there's nothing here for you to do," she told him. "I'm the only one left and I can certainly cook for myself."

Dan—he hated the name Cooky—looked at his boss and there was a soft light in his eyes. Her worry worried him and he said, "You shouldn't stay here alone, Miss Ballard, with all the trouble you've been having."

"Maybe you're right, Cooky," she said. Her mind drifted to something else as she

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*MOST MEN wouldn't work for a woman, but crippled Dan Higgins wished that he could do more to show his love for his lady boss*

said, "Although I don't know what you could do about it."

Dan dropped his eyes to the ground. He wanted to cry out against the injustice of her words, but he would never speak up to Ellie Ballard.

"I reckon I am pretty useless, Miss Ballard," he told her. "But I was a top hand before that horse fell on me. If I could still ride without its half killing me, I'd show you. I can handle a gun, too."

Ellie's eyes softened and the lines of her face smoothed out for a moment. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know what I was saying. Mal Drake has me so worried I don't know what I'm doing half the time."

Dan Higgins nodded and limped closer to her. He reached out to rest a hand on her arm, to comfort her, but then drew back before he touched her.

"That's why you need somebody around here," he said. "Maybe there's some way left to carry off that roundup."

She turned to him and her eyes pleaded, although they both knew that the situation was well nigh hopeless. She said, "We've got to hold the fall roundup, Cooky. If I don't get my beef to market, I'm ruined."

Dan frowned. "With Drake hiring away all your help, that's going to be hard to do," he said. "It's a long drive to the loading pens at Crawford." Dan hesitated a moment, the said, "What does Drake want with your ranch, anyway, Miss Ballard?"

Ellie's eyes hardened and she was silent so long that Dan thought she wasn't going to answer him. Finally she said in a low voice, "It's not the ranch he wants. It's me."

"What!" It was almost a shout. Dan's face darkened in anger as he let his emotions run. The thought that anybody had ideas about Ellie was enough to make Dan see red. But it scared him, too, because they might take her away from him. He had no hopes for himself, but at least he could dream, as long as Ellie belonged to nobody else.

"Somebody ought to put a bullet right through Drake's black heart," Dan said bitterly.

Ellie's eyes softened and she rested a hand on Dan's arm. He looked up and then away, for he couldn't trust his voice and what he might say when he was looking into her eyes. She said, "It's all right, Cooky. Maybe I should marry him and be done with all this worrying."

"And lose the ranch? Your father built this ranch for you, Miss Ballard. You can't just throw it away."

The worry came back into the girl's face as she said, "I won't have any choice about it if I don't get some help on the roundup."

"I'll go into town and see if I can't talk some of the men into coming back," Dan said.

Ellie looked doubtful and said, "With Drake paying higher wages? Don't waste your time, Cooky. The men never liked working for a woman, anyway."

DAN shook his head and turned back to the cook shack. He had limped two steps toward the doorway when Ellie's words stopped him. She said, "I don't suppose it did any good, but I wrote to a friend of mine in Crawford, Cooky. It's Mr. Lawton, who owns the general store there. I asked him to round up any men he could find."

"I could ride over there and see what he's got," Dan said, hope returning to his eyes. "If I took the buckboard I could be back by tomorrow evening."

"I haven't much hope, Cooky," she told him, "but you might as well go ahead. And don't be too particular about what they look like. If they can sit a horse, they'll be of help."

It was still early morning when Dan drove the buckboard from the yard. Ellie waved at him from the porch of the house and Dan waved back.

She sure looks small there, he thought, but she's got more sand than most men. He'd worked for Box B for more than three years. After the accident up in the Panhandle when a horse had fallen on him, breaking his leg in three places, he hadn't been of much use, except for cooking. It was a living, anyway, and now it looked like it would pay off. At least, he was getting a chance to be near Ellie and be some real help to her.

The town of Crawford had been built for

the express purpose of serving the cattle country. It was a small town on the railroad, but once a year it mushroomed into a wild, hell-scaring town. That was during the fall roundup when they were shipping cattle east. But when Dan drove in, the town wasn't much more than a ghost. His hopes dropped. Every available man was out on the surrounding ranches, helping in the roundup. What could Ellie hope to find in this town?

But he drove up to Lawton's Mercantile and hopped from the wagon, letting his weight land on his good leg. He limped inside and found Lawton behind the counter. When he told the man his business the store owner shook his head.

"I looked around town, Higgins, but I couldn't find a thing," Lawton said. "Most men don't want to work for a woman, anyway."

Dan said, "Isn't there anybody in town that I could get? Most anything at all would help."

"There are a couple of jaspers over at the Longhorn Saloon," Lawton said, "but I don't know if you'd want them. They aren't much to look at."

"Box B won't be much to look at if I don't get some help."

Dan thanked the store owner and went onto the street. He saw the sign in front of the Longhorn and headed that way at a fast limp. Over the sign were a pair of horns from a steer, mementos from days gone by. Shorthorns were the thing on the range now.

It was just turning dark as Dan shoved into the saloon. The big room was nearly empty and Dan's footsteps echoed hollowly as he limped to the bar. The bartender watched him expressionlessly, a well-polished glass in one hand, a towel in the other.

"What'll it be, friend?" the apron said.

"I'm looking for some men to work the Box B."

The bartender looked Dan up and down, frowning. "It's roundup time, friend," he growled. "You won't find anybody in this town."

"Mr. Lawton said I might find a couple of men here," Dan said doggedly.

"Box B. Isn't that that outfit run by a woman?"

"That's right," Dan said, bristling.

"Don't get your dander up, friend. I was just going to say I'd heard a lot of good things about her. Mr. Lawton comes here quite a bit. He talks about her all the time." The bartender nodded toward a dark corner of the room. "There're a couple of sad ones over there. They aren't much but they're about all you'll find."

TURNING, Dan squinted into the corner. Two shadowy forms told him there was life there, and he walked closer. But his heart sank at the sight of them. He'd seen a hundred like them. They hung out in every saloon he'd ever been in. But he put his feelings behind him and walked up to the table.

"How'd you like to work for Box B?" he asked.

One of the men regarded him blankly. The other was resting his head in his arms, and didn't move.

"Go away," the live one said.

"You look like you could use a stake, friend," Dan said. "Fifty a month and found."

"I don't need money."

The bartender came around the bar and walked to where Dan was standing. He leaned over the table and pulled the man to his feet. "Your credit just ran out here, Luke. You'd better take the job, like the man says."

Luke thought about it for a time, then shook his friend's shoulder. "Hey, Zeb," he said, "we have a job."

Zeb groaned but didn't move. The bartender lifted him to his feet and slapped his face, hard. "Both of you get along with this gent here," the bartender said. "And don't give him any trouble or you won't get served in here when you get back from roundup."

Dan thanked the bartender and steered the two men outside. In the light they looked even worse. They were well past forty years old, and neither looked as if he had been in a saddle for ten years. Their clothes were ratty and their boots so old Dan wondered if these men hadn't come up the trail with the first cattle drive. Dan steered them directly to the buckboard.

"Get in the wagon," Dan ordered. He pulled a blanket from the seat of the wagon and said, "If you want to sleep, get under this."

The two men climbed in and pulled the blanket over them. Dan went back to Lawton's.

The man was about ready to close up. Somebody else was in the store with him.

"Oh, there you are, Higgins," Lawton said. "I have another hand for you."

Dan looked at the other man. He was big and well-dressed. Lawton moved the lantern on the counter, and Dan saw that the man was also good-looking. His face was square, the eyes deepset and dark.

"Well," Lawton said, "you going to hire him or not?"

Dan didn't want to. He had a feeling about what would happen when Ellie and this man met, and he didn't want it to happen. He hesitated a little longer.

Lawton squinted his eyes at Dan and said, "What's the matter with you, Higgins? I saw you load those two wrecks into the back of your wagon. Surely you're going to hire Phil Carlyle."

Dan put his personal feelings behind him and said, "Sure, sure. I'm Dan Higgins, Mr. Carlyle."

Carlyle took Dan's proffered hand and Dan winced at the strength of the man's grip. He said, "We'll have to drive back tonight. I don't want to lose those two I have in the back of the wagon. If you have your own horse, Mr. Carlyle, you can tie him on behind the wagon."

"Right. Jim's down at the stable," Carlyle said briskly.

"Jim?"

"My horse." Carlyle left the store then and Dan looked at Lawton questioningly.

Lawton shrugged and said, "Carlyle's been hanging around town for several days. I heard he's not too much of a hand. Seems like he has an income from back east somewhere. But he's young and strong and should be some help."

"Yeah. Well, thanks, Mr. Lawton. Between the five of us we ought to be able to stage some kind of a roundup."

IT HAPPENED just like Dan had figured it would. They got back to the Box B early in the morning and Dan could tell that Ellie had just gotten out of bed. When she met Carlyle she stared at him and he stared back.

Carlyle said something like, "Well, I think I'll like it here at Box B."

Dan couldn't blame Ellie, really. With all her worries and only a crippled cook to help her out, Dan guessed that Phil Carlyle must look like manna from heaven. But he didn't like the way Carlyle looked at Ellie, as if he hadn't seen a woman in months.

Dan interrupted as soon as he could, and took Carlyle to the bunkhouse. The other two, Zeb and Luke, were sitting on the edge of one of the bunks, staring straight ahead like it was all a terrible dream.

"You haven't time to sit here all day," Dan said. "Let's get up and get going."

The two men grunted and got to their feet.

"I reckon you can saddle your own horses," Dan said. "You'll find saddles and horses at the corral."

"Of course we can saddle our own horses." Luke said in disgust.

It was nearly an hour before Luke and Zeb were saddled up and ready to go. Ellie rode up and the three men trailed out after her, Carlyle pulling up beside her before they left the yard.

Dan cursed his game leg. For a moment he thought of saddling and riding out after them, but the memory of the pain from the last time he'd ridden held him in the cookshack. Anyway, Ellie had told him he would be more use cooking for the men.

Box B wasn't a large spread, and every night the three men and Ellie rode into the ranch house. They were lucky that the ranch had a box canyon near the center of the range. They could drive the cattle into this and close off the one entrance with a barbed-wire gate, leaving them safe for the night.

And each night Dan watched the romance between Ellie and Phil Carlyle ripen. What Carlyle did on the range, Dan couldn't know. But he did know that the man spent all his time at the ranch house in the evenings. Dan found himself hating Carlyle, then chided

himself for being a jealous fool. He told himself that if he really loved Ellie he should be happy for her. But that didn't make him feel any better.

Then, about a week later, Mal Drake struck. Dan had been wondering what the man would do when he heard about the Box B roundup. He found out when Ellie and the rest rode in one evening. He knew something was wrong the minute he saw Ellie's downcast face.

"What happened?" Dan asked anxiously as Ellie and the others walked in silently from the corral.

The girl turned to him and her stricken eyes cut Dan like a knife. She said, "Last night somebody opened the gate and drove all the cattle we'd rounded up back into the hills. We had to start all over."

"Drake," Dan muttered. "He was just waiting for this."

Carlyle took Ellie's arm and said, "Come on, Ellie, let's go to the house. There's no use talking about it now."

Dan grabbed at Carlyle's arm, pulling the man around toward him. His eyes flashed in anger as he said, "You should have known enough to post a guard out there. You knew we were having trouble."

"Cooky!" Ellie said sharply. "Phil couldn't help it, and you have no right to blame him. It was my fault."

Carlyle pulled his arm loose and a triumphant smile touched his lips. He turned away and led Ellie toward the house. He knows, Dan thought, and it was a jolt. To have his rival get the upper hand and know that he, Dan, cared, was a pride-tearing thing.

NEXT morning Dan hurried through his chore of washing the breakfast dishes. Before the others had left he limped his way to the corral and set about cutting out a horse.

Ellie saw him and said, "Cooky, what in the world are you doing?"

Dan turned and led the horse he had just roped over to the rail. He said, "I'm riding today, Miss Ballard. You'll need all the help you can get from now on."

"But what about your leg?"

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but to hell with the leg. There are some things more important than a little pain in the leg."

Ellie said softly, "Thank you, Dan. I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

Send Carlyle packing as soon's the roundup is over, Dan wanted to say, but he held his tongue. He threw the blanket on the horse, then the saddle. When he had cinched the saddle down he was ready to ride.

Luckily it was his right leg that was crippled, so he had no trouble mounting. It was after he was on the horse that the trouble always began. The leg had mended crooked, so that before he had ridden far a dull aching would start, growing stronger the farther he rode. He pushed the thought away. He'd just have to bear it for the next few days.

Before they left the yard, Carlyle rode in close to him, bumping his game leg so that Dan winced with pain. "Getting worried about your girl friend, Limpy?" Carlyle said. Then he reined around and rode after Ellie before Dan could answer.

Box B lay in rough country, with high ridges and steep sides—a place hard to find cattle in and hard to drive them out of. One long, high ridge separated Box B from Drake's MD Connected. It was almost impossible to climb the ridge unless it were done on hands and knees.

Before the morning was half over Dan was pleasantly surprised to find that Zeb and Luke were working out better than he had thought they would. True, they didn't overwork themselves, but they kept on the job, and that was the most important thing.

They were assigned the task of keeping the herd bunched as Ellie, Carlyle and Dan drove the cattle out of the hills. At the end of the day all five of them would drive the herd to the box canyon, and this time there would be a guard posted during the night.

Dan worked as he had never worked before. Sweat poured from him, mostly from the work but partly from the pain his leg was giving him. He had little time to worry about the others, but he did see Carlyle close to Ellie several times, and it angered him.

"That so-and-so," he muttered. "He'd get a lot more done if he'd let Ellie alone." The

terrain was such that a man worked best alone.

Dan drove a small bunch before him to the growing herd, his leg throbbing with each step his horse took. Then he turned to go into the hills again. Ellie came up to him, and she was alone.

"You're working too hard," Ellie said in a bantering tone.

"There's a lot of work to do," Dan told her seriously.

"Why don't you stop a minute and rest, Dan?"

Ellie had used his right name for the second time today, and it gave Dan new life. He said, "I'm not tired, Miss Ballard."

"Well, I am," she said. "Let's stop in the shade of that cottonwood over there and rest." When Dan looked doubtful, she told him, "That's an order from the boss."

He grinned at her and they rode toward the tree. He knew she was taking the break so that he could rest his leg, and a little more of his heart went out to her, if that were possible.

THEY dropped down into the tiny plot of grass, and Dan wanted to cry out with the relief it gave his leg.

"It's pretty bad, isn't it, Dan?" Ellie said. "I saw the look on your face when you got off your horse."

"Aw, it isn't so bad, Miss Ballard," he said.

"Why don't you call me Ellie, Dan? Everybody else does. At least those that like me do. You like me, don't you, Dan?"

What more could he do, he wondered. If she didn't know how he felt about her now, then she would only understand if he came right out and told her he loved her. He didn't trust himself to answer, so he merely nodded.

Unconsciously, Dan began rubbing the sore leg. Ellie watched him for a moment, then said, "Why can't you get that leg fixed? I should think a doctor would know what to do."

Dan smiled wanly. "A doctor told me once I could get it fixed if I'd go back East to some hospital or other. He said they'd break it and reset it. But that costs money."

"Maybe someday you can do it, Dan. You shouldn't have to be crippled all your life."

Dan colored at the sympathy and said, "It isn't so bad once you get used to it."

"I want to thank you for everything you've done," she went on. "I don't know what I'd have done if you had left along with the others.

"It was nothing," he mumbled.

He heard the sound of an approaching mount above the bawling of the cattle, and knew that Carlyle had seen them. The man rode in, straight and tall in the saddle. He was quite a hunk of man, Dan had to admit, reluctantly.

Carlyle grinned sardonically at Dan and said, "You have your orders crossed, Limpy. We came out here on a roundup, not a picnic."

"Phil!" Ellie cut in sharply. "I ordered Dan off his horse. Don't forget that I still run this ranch."

Dan said, "I was just going anyway, Miss Ellie." He couldn't quite bring himself to call her just "Ellie."

He mounted and, before he rode off, saw that Ellie was smiling at Carlyle, who had dismounted and dropped to the grass beside her. Some girls can sure get fooled, he thought. That Carlyle had something wrong with him, and it was more than just being a poor cowhand. Well, there was work to do, and he had no time to worry about Ellie and Carlyle just then.

For almost a week they drove cattle into the box canyon, and each night two of them stood guard at the gate. There had been no hint of trouble, and Dan watched the worry lines disappear from Ellie's face. But still it was with a certain dread that he regarded the approaching end of the roundup. Carlyle was courting Ellie with more fervor than ever, and Dan knew that at the end of the roundup Ellie would have more time to think about Carlyle.

He drove a bunch of cattle toward the big herd below. He saw Zeb and Luke working the cattle, moving about skillfully now after almost two weeks' practice. They hadn't bolted for liquor, as Dan had expected.

*(Turn to page 84)*

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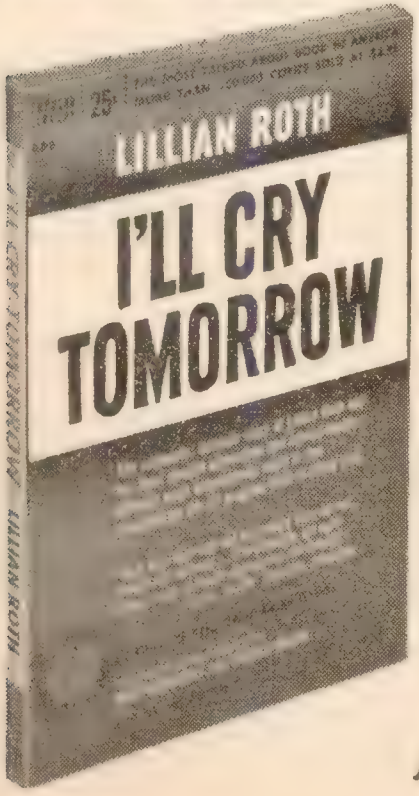


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A great cloud of dust rose from the restless herd, and Dan pulled his neckerchief over his nose and mouth as he drew near. Luke waved at him and Dan waved back, as he turned to head back to the hills after driving his bunch into the herd.

The leg throbbed steadily but Dan was getting used to it, almost. For a while in the evening he would find it impossible to walk after riding all day, but then the circulation would come back and he would be able to limp around again.

AS HE rode back toward the hills, Dan caught a momentary glimpse of a single man on the top of the ridge that divided Box B from MD Connected. But then the man was gone again, lost behind brush and boulders.

It all happened so fast that Dan wasn't sure he had seen anybody at all. As the day grew old he thought about it, and the more he thought the more it seemed that it must be his imagination. He said nothing about it to the others. It was his night to stand guard, anyway.

But nothing happened that night. The sky grew light in the east and Luke, who had stood alternate watches with Dan, sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"We'll send the cattle to market tomorrow, I reckon," Luke said, yawning. "A couple of weeks ago I'd have given anything to get into Crawford. Now I don't particularly care."

"I just hope we get to market without any trouble," Dan said as he moved about preparing breakfast.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Mal Drake has been lying too low to suit me. Something's going to break, and my guess is it'll be soon."

"Aw, that bum leg has you crotchety as an old man, Higgins," Luke told him. "I think that Drake fellow gave up on us."

"He wants the Box B in the worst way, and he isn't going to give up."

Dan had anticipated an attempt to stampede the cattle when they got them on the trail to Crawford, but the trouble started way before that.

Ellie, Zeb, and Phil Carlyle had just ridden out from the ranch. The five of them were at the mouth of the box canyon when the shooting started. The boom of the guns echoed down the deep canyon.

"They're trying to stampede them in the canyon," Dan said, making for his horse. "We've got to stop them. If the cattle hit this narrow entrance, it's good-by cattle."

Ellie moved toward her horse, but Dan stopped her. He said, "You stay out here, Ellie. There won't be room for you when those cattle get to milling."

"But—"

"Just do as I say," Dan said firmly. Ellie wrinkled her nose, and a new light came into her eyes as she looked at him. "The rest of you come along with me," Dan went on. "We'll get those cattle to milling. If we can't do that we'll have to try to string them out so that when they hit the entrance here, most of them will get through."

He swung into the saddle and drove the horse on a run into the canyon. The cattle were already stirring restlessly; they had been bedded down, but most were now on their feet.

Puffs of smoke from the canyon wall told Dan that the men had not yet made their way to the canyon floor. Once they did—it would be the end.

Zeb and Luke followed Dan into the canyon.

Dan looked behind and cursed when he didn't see Carlyle. But there was no time to worry about that now. He slowed his pace and the two men came alongside.

Dan said, "We'll get them to milling. If we can do that I think we can hold them for a time."

The two men nodded, and they drove their mounts forward. It would be an almost impossible job with only three men, Dan knew, but he had no choice. He didn't think Drake would have his men shoot them down, but it was a chance they had to take.

The cattle were moving by the time Dan and the others reached them. They drew their guns and began firing into the air, shouting, waving their hats, anything to get the cattle moving in a circle.

THE firing from the canyon walls increased. Dan judged there were ten or fifteen of Drake's men, at least, but they were all on foot, since the canyon walls were too steep to bring a horse down. That was the only advantage Box B had.

The three men slowed the initial rush of the cattle, but then Drake's men reached the floor of the canyon, and their firing and shouting drove the bulk of the herd into the leaders. For a moment longer Box B held the advantage they had gained. Then it was as if a dam had broken. The terrified cattle moved forward in a rush, and Dan had to put his mount into a run to keep from being crushed.

"String 'em out," he shouted. He saw Luke nod. Zeb was too far away to hear.

It was some distance to the mouth of the canyon. The three men worked frantically, trying to shape the herd into a funnel-like pattern. Some would be lost, but maybe the bulk could get through. Dan shot a glance behind. A line of men ran down the canyon after the herd, still firing, keeping the stragglers moving.

The canyon was narrowing rapidly, pressing in upon the herd like a giant vise. Dan and Luke rode on one side, Zeb was on the other. Frantically, they tried to work the herd into a line of cattle instead of a bunch. But there just wasn't enough time.

Dan heard Luke shout, and he looked up to see a vertical wall of rock closing in on him. He reined away but there was no place to go. He was trapped between the herd and the rock. He saw a low ledge and reached for it, as the herd rushed down upon his horse.

The animal screamed as it was crushed against the rock, and Dan felt his bad leg give under the strain. Pain shot through him, blinding him to everything else, but somehow he managed to pull himself up onto the ledge before he passed out.

It was strangely quiet when he came to his senses. He listened, expecting to hear the thunder of hoofs. But all he heard was voices.

"I thought I saw him go down about here," someone said.

"He makes two we got." Dan recognized Drake's hoarse voice. "That other one got away with the herd."

Dan lifted his head and looked about. Three or four men were combing the rocks, while Drake stood in the middle of the canyon entrance.

One of the men said, "Who shot who, Mr. Drake? There was so damn much confusion when those others pulled out, I couldn't tell what was going on."

Drake scowled and said, "Those yellowbellies didn't like it when we started gunning down the men. Said they only signed on to drive cattle, not to fight a war."

Dan lay back down. Cold sweat gave him the chills, and nausea flooded over him as the pain in his leg came back. Somebody had gotten shot, but whether it was Luke or Zeb he didn't know. Suddely, violent rage swept over him as he thought of what Drake had done. All their work had been for nothing. One man had been killed—or maybe more, for all he knew. And Ellie didn't have a chance to hold onto her ranch now, with the cattle scattered all over creation.

He grabbed the pistol from the holster at his waist and shoved upward. He was in a sitting position before Drake saw him. The rancher shouted and lifted his pistol from its holster, but Dan was faster. The gun jumped in his hand twice, and Drake sank to the ground.

One of the other men snapped off a shot that missed, and Dan turned on him. He slammed a shot that caught the man in the shoulder.

Then somebody shouted, "Let's get out of here. The boss got it."

They turned and ran up the canyon, and Dan let them go. They were only hired hands. They'd be gone from Drake's ranch by nightfall.

He holstered the pistol and started to make his way to the ground. The bad leg was broken, but he lifted himself off the edge of the ledge and dropped to the ground. The pain was excruciating, and he lay on his back in the twilight between blackout and consciousness.

How long he lay there he didn't know. The next thing he was conscious of was Ellie's voice. "Dan," she was saying. "It's me, Ellie."

He opened his eyes to meet her worried gaze. He smiled weakly. Then the smile dropped from his face and he said, "I'm sorry, Ellie. We tried. Maybe if Phil—" But no, even with Phil Carlyle's help they'd have had no chance.

"Phil's gone, Dan," she said. "I sent him packing when he refused to help. He was afraid of the gunfire. I don't know how I could have made such a mistake about him."

Dan pushed into a half-sitting position. "Everybody makes mistakes, Ellie. I've made a few myself."

"How's your leg?" she asked.

"It doesn't hurt so much now. I guess it's numb. Maybe this time I can get it set right, so I can ride again."

Ellie nodded.

"I sent one of the men for a wagon. We'll have to take you into town. The rest of the men are holding the herd."

"What men?" Dan asked.

Ellie smiled. "We didn't lose many cattle," she told him. "They ran for a while, then Luke and I got them milling. It wasn't long before some of the men that Drake had hired came back and offered to help. Said they were sorry, and that they hadn't known what Drake was really up to."

"What about Zeb?"

Ellie looked away and said, "He wasn't so lucky. He got caught like you did, but Drake made sure he didn't get out. He shot him. Luke saw it all."

"And now things are right back where they started from," Dan said with a trace of bitterness.

"Not quite, Dan," Ellie said. She leaned over and kissed him tenderly. Then she said, "I must have loved you all along. All I could think of during that stampede was you. Could you learn to care for me, darling?"

"Just watch me," Dan said. And he kissed her.

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# The Last Laugh

*a true story by*
*J. J. Kerttula*
*and*
*D. L. McDonald*

IF THE Crow chieftain named Tattooed Forehead had not passed on to his happy hunting grounds before the heavy influx of whites into his country began, knowing him might have done much to dispel the general misconception of the Indian as a solemn and humorless individual.

But maybe it is just as well the white men didn't

meet up with that waggish Red Man, or perhaps their usually friendly relations with the Crows might have suffered quite a setback. A lifelong practical joker—and some of his jokes were rugged—if Tattoed Forehead had turned his peculiar talents against the whites, there would probably have been some repercussions.

Despite the fact that he preferred guile to a more direct approach, Tattooed Forehead was a strong and sagacious leader. If his Crows had had the Sioux's reasons for hating the white man, Tattooed Forehead would probably have followed in the path of the Sioux's great chieftain, Sitting Bull. Being the kind of man he was, Tattooed Forehead probably would have tried to take on the whole U. S. Army and outfox them all by himself. And who knows? There might have been some sheepish, red-faced generals, if he had.

Tattooed Forehead was a large man, as Indians go, well-built and strong. He kept physically fit—which all chieftains did not always do—and was capable of feats of strength equal to those of two or three other braves combined.

In addition, he was quick at thinking up ways to show his strength or cunning in the most impressive manner, a very helpful talent for a leader in the Indians' culture. Most of all, he was lucky to live in the last golden days of his people, when there was still time for laughter in the Indian world.

Frequently his cunning won victories for his Crows without the loss or wounding of one brave in his war party. For instance, one afternoon a small war party he was leading discovered five Assiniboine hunters in the Yellowstone Valley and gave chase. Both parties were afoot, but slowly the pursuers gained, until the hunters were forced to take shelter in a cave in the bluffs. So strong was their postion that the Crows did not dare to go in after them.

Tattooed Forehead ordered his warriors back to cover in the brush, and drew the ball from his gun. Then, chattering, laughing, and shouting like an idiot, he advanced toward the cave. The Assiniboines, laughing at his antics, allowed him to approach.

They assumed he was crazy and, like all Indians, on no account would they kill such a person. They believed that crazy people were possessed by a spirit which could bring great misfortune down upon the killer.

At the mouth of the cave, Tattooed Forehead squatted down and shouted to the Assiniboines in their own language. "It is a pity that such fine men should be killed. Here, take my gun. It is loaded with four balls and will kill more people than your single-shot guns can. Exchange your guns for it."

The Assiniboines hesitated, reluctant to believe, but finally agreed to the exchange. When he stepped forward to make the exchange, Tattooed Forehead saw they had only two guns among them.

"Wait here," he said, "and I'll get you another gun as good as the one I have given you."

Still carrying on the act, he sneaked into the brush and seemed to steal another weapon from the Crows. Unobtrusively he took the bullets out of that one—as he had with the first gun too—before he came giggling back to complete the zany trade.

When the Assiniboines were at the mercy of the Crows, with just two unloaded weapons among them, Tattooed Forehead's laughter suddenly became more sane. But by that time the Assiniboines had no time left to enjoy the joke. That night Tattooed Forehead's braves sang the Victory Song over five fresh scalps, that had not even cost them a scratch.

The Assiniboines seem to have been a constant butt of this Crow's peculiar brand of humor. Alone, or with small parties, he sneaked into their camp times without number to steal their horses or whatever else was handy. (It should be remembered that in the Indians' mores stealing from the enemy was just good clean fun.) Understandably, however, the Assiniboines resented Tattooed Forehead, and most of them hungered to bring home his scalp lock.

ONE winter, while hunting alone in Assiniboine country, he shot a fat young buffalo cow. So engrossed had he been in the hunt that he did not realize how close he'd come to the enemy's camp. Now, with the animal down, he squatted beside it, feasting on that Indian delicacy, raw liver.

Suddenly the slap of unshod ponies' hoofs in the distance made him realize how dangerous his position had become. The Assiniboine party would stumble over him in a short time and—aside from the personal considerations where he was concerned—they were sure to resent the implied insult that the tribe was so weak a lone hunter could down game with impunity practically at the edge of their camp. This was a subtle Indian insult almost as deadly as suggesting to a warrior that he should send his squaw out to do the fighting.

With trouble not far off, Tattooed Forehead set out to prepare to meet it. From his pouch he took fresh white paint, which he smeared on his face and hands until they were as white as the surrounding snow.

Red liver and blood were daubed on top of this, until he presented an uncouth and amusing appearance, more like a circus clown than anything else. Then he quickly scooped snow over the carcass of the buffalo so it would not, he hoped, be noticed at a distance and set out to meet the Assiniboines at a fast walk.

Within a hundred feet, he ran head-on into a large party of Assiniboine hunters. The snow in the little gully was very deep, and they had left their ponies at its mouth. Since they too were afoot, the odds at first seemed to be in his favor, but there were enough of them to spread out and surround him, and the snow was too deep for running or dodging.

Instead, he moved unhurriedly toward them, assuming his favorite role of an idiot. His talked to them in Assiniboine, and his antics and appearance were so comical he soon had the warriors doubled up with laughter.

All the while he was slowly making his way up a small hill and away from their ponies, but they were too engrossed in his performance to notice this. As they trailed behind, slapping each other on the shoulder and guffawing, Tattooed Forehead reached the top of the hill, where the wind had blown off the snow and the going was good.

With a shriek, then, he pointed down the draw toward the tethered ponies. By the time the Assiniboines had turned to look, he was off at top speed. He had a long lead on the befuddled hunters before they realized what had happened. Though they followed him, afoot and on horseback, they never got close enough for more than a few snap shots. Only one of the shots hit the fleeing Indian chief, but even that did little damage since it landed in the fleshy part of the forearm.

When they drew close to Crow country, the Assiniboines abandoned the chase, probably by now suspecting it was some sort of a trap anyhow. When Tattooed Forehead reached the Crow camp and told his tale, his exploit was celebrated as a daring joke on the Assiniboines, and his prestige went up.

Though some of Tattooed Forehead's more rugged jokes were played against his enemies, even his own tribe did not escape his attentions. One brave, in particular, Oomatu, came in for more than his share; but, being quite a prankster himself, Oomatu often gave as good as he got.

As the years wore on and both men grew too old for the more active pursuits of hunting and fighting, most of their time was spent playing practical jokes on each other. Tattooed Forehead must have been better at dishing it out than taking it for, when Oomatu's jokes clicked more and more frequently, he lost his temper.

Early one morning, when the two were preparing to accompany a group of hunters as specators on a buffalo hunt, Tattooed Forehead watched his chance and slipped a branch of prickly pear under the other's saddle pad. But Oomatu was expecting something of the sort, and caught the act.

When Tattooed Forehead's back was turned, Oomatu quickly transferred the cactus from his own to the other's saddle blanket. Tattooed Forehead did not notice it, and prepared to mount.

When he hit the saddle, the horse went up. A half-dozen quick and wicked crowhops later, the old chief was on the ground, flat on his back, while Oomatu leaned against the side of a tree and roared with laughter.

"For this I will kill you!" Tattooed Forehead shouted, as he clambered to his feet. Oomatu paid to attention to this remark, which he judged to be the angry words of a jokester who was irked that his prank had backfired. But Tattooed Forehead was giving notice and, in so doing, living up to the In-

dian custom which freed a man of a murder charge if the victim were notified beforehand of the intention. Indians figured that, forewarned, a brave would take measures to protect himself.

Still glaring at the laughing Oomatu, Tattooed Forehead reached out and jerked a bow from a nearby hunter's hand. Before anyone had time to realize what was happening, he had bent the bow and driven an arrow clear through the other's chest. Oomatu's laughter choked off, and a look of amazement crossed his face as he struggled to support himself upright.

"This is the last joke you will play on Tattooed Forehead," the old chief roared, and he in turn began to laugh at the efforts of the wounded man to walk, supporting himself against the swaying hide walls of the lodge.

Oomatu's efforts were not without purpose, however. Beside the lodge door lay a pile of hunting gear, and toward it he wobbled. Then, swiftly, he leaned down and grasped a bow. Before Tattooed Forehead could move or duck, an arrow had found its mark in the chief's chest.

While the onlookers stood stunned, the two perpetual jokers stood facing each other for a long moment. Choked laughter bubbled up in Tattooed Forehead's throat, and was answered by that of Oomatu. Then, almost together, they crumpled and fell facing each other. There they died, as they had lived, with the honors about even.

They had shared even that "last laugh" with each other.

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# KNOW YOUR WEST

**1. The Goodnight cattle trail crossed the Pecos River at a place called which of the following: Horsehead Crossing, Buffalo Bend, Comanche Ford?**

**2. "A Bronc To Breakfast," "Last of the Herd," and "When Wagon Trails Were Dim," are all titles of what?**

**3. What is the usual name for the colorbreed sometimes called "leopard horses?"**

**4. Few purebred horses are more famous in the Southwest than the palomino strain raised by J. W. Shoemaker, Watrous, New Mexico. What basic breed are they?**

**5. Is the spade bridle bit of Texas or Mexican origin?**

**6. The triangle-patterned prominence on the bottom of a horse's hoof is called which: pucker pad, pastern, frog, short heel?**

**7. Monte Foreman is well known in the cow country as a leading authority on which: old cattle brands, horse training, rattlesnakes, or Old West firearms?**

**8. Though rarely so called in the Old West, "Model P" was the manufacturer's official designation for what famous firearm?**

**9. Langtry, Texas, formerly called Vinegarroon, was the hangout of what famous picturesque character of the Old West?**

**10. Cutting contests are becoming a popular feature of cow country rodeos. What are they?**

*—Rattlesnake Robert*

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**You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

# OUT OF THE CHUTES

IT WAS big news in the rodeo world when the best bucking horse, Miss Klamath, was ridden. She'd bucked off the best of them, time and time again. She'd kick up those hind legs, twisting a bit, and another cowboy would bite the dust—and miss a trip to the pay-off window.

Few cowboys thought they could ride her. Most top-hands who were unlucky enough to draw her just hoped they'd land as softly as possible.

One of them, Bill Ward, had had the first ride—or attempted ride—on Miss Klamath after she was bought by the Christensen Brothers from a small stock contractor a couple of years ago. Bill went sailing, two seconds after he came out of the chutes. Later he informed one of the Christensens that their string now boasted the greatest bucker he'd ever tried to rake with his spurs—or even stay aboard.

Bill's prophecy turned out to be true. All the best top-hands in the business tried to master Miss Klamath, and failed. In fact, in all her rodeo career there is only one recorded ride to the whistle—by Bill Ward, the rider who'd dreamed of paying her back for her unkind treatment of him.

But that's not the end of the story. Only a few days after she was ridden (in Klamath Falls, Ore., the town for which she was named) she lifted those wicked rear hoofs, twisted like a corkscrew, and dumped Manuel Enos into the Ogden, Utah, arena. She kicked so high and so hard that her front feet slipped and she fell, breaking both of her high-flying hind legs. There was no hope of mending those bones. A few hours later Miss Klamath had to be destroyed.

"I never felt anything like that kick," said Manuel Enos, when he heard the news. And others who'd been watching, from the rail and in the grandstand, agreed. It was almost as if Miss Klamath, ridden once, was determined it would never happen again—and she killed herself making sure.

Usually a bucker has to be dead quite a while before becoming a legend. But, back of the chutes, they're already comparing Miss Klamath with Midnight, Ol' Five, and Steamboat. Now she's where no one can ever prove she wasn't as great as any of them—or even greater. Perhaps the best way to judge how good she really was will be by how long she's remembered.

Today cowboys who tried to ride Miss Klamath say to cowboys who never got the chance, "You may think you're pretty good, but I'd like to have seen you ride Miss Klamath." If, ten years from today, they're still saying the same thing, we'll know she was really one of the best.

That's the end of Miss Klamath's story—except for a postscript about Bill Ward. Not long after he rode Miss Klamath he was thrown by a run-of-the-mill bronc at Boulder, Colo. He bumped his head pretty hard, but he seemed okay.

On he went to the rodeo at Great Falls, Mont. Again he was tossed by a bronc, and this time he didn't get up. A medical examination revealed broken ribs and internal injuries. He is banged up seriously enough to keep him out of competition for at least a few weeks, and that may be long enough to put him out of the race for the saddle-bronc championship this year—though till now he's been running neck and neck with Casey Tibbs and Deb Copenhaver.

That ride he made on Miss Klamath is probably the one he's proudest of in his whole career. But if you were superstitious, you could sure make out a case for its being a bad-luck ride—bad luck for Bill as well as for Miss Klamath. *Adios,*

THE EDITORS

*"Appears we're in a bit of a spot," Beal said mockingly*

# Ambush at Arrow River

***By John Jakes***

TOWARD the end of the afternoon they reached the river. Lt. Ashton Cullen, in command of the platoon, ordered a halt about a quarter of a mile north of the river bank. The men climbed down from their horses, but Martha Pierpoint sat numbly on the seat of the small wagon, grimy and tired from the grueling trip.

***WHAT ASH CULLEN had done, for a woman's sake, amounted to murder . . . and he would not rest easy till he had made amends***

A strong wind—a good thirty miles an hour, Ash Cullen reckoned—was blowing out of the north, across Arrow River and the foothills beyond that shimmered dusty and golden in the dying sun. That same wind had whipped up a storm the preceding day that had slowed their journey from Brent City to Fort Morris.

According to schedule, they should have reached the fort by this time. They were half a day late. Technically, Cullen thought, they were safe. But he didn't like the stillness of the

hills across the river. Red Hand was riding again. And Reese, the civilian scout, had been gone too long.

Cullen sat his horse out ahead of the platoon, surveying the burnished river. As if in answer to his thoughts, burly Sergeant Florey came clattering up. Cullen turned, an unhandsome man whose ugliness was only relieved by his good nature and his warm smile. Now, though, he felt neither good-natured nor ready to smile.

Florey pointed off to the right, along the river. "There comes Reese, sir."

Cullen scowled, catching sight of the rider breaking from a thin screen of trees. "He's riding too fast to suit me. Let's go meet him."

They rode forward, Cullen's eyes darting uneasily again and again to the curving slopes of the hills across the river. Reese pulled his buckskin to a halt and wiped sweat from his face. The scout wore a sullen expression, and his clothing smelled. Cullen did not particularly like him.

"Where have you been?" Cullen demanded sharply.

"Taking a look around," Reese replied. "I don't like what I saw."

"Come on, Reese," Florey said. "Make sense."

Reese lounged in his saddle, a lazy don't-give-a-damn smile on his stubbly face. "All right, gents, here she is. I nearly got my hair lifted by a group of Red Hand's Apaches over in those hills."

Cullen said, "How many?"

"About a dozen in the bunch that chased me. I lost them, though."

"Then we're not in any serious trouble," Cullen said.

Reese continued to smile, mockingly. "You don't know the whole story, Lieutenant. I saw some sign and I didn't like it. I didn't get chased until after I'd gone nearly the whole way around the platoon. Like I say, a dozen of Red Hand's braves saw me. But I caught sight of eighty-ninety more that never even looked in my direction."

Reese surveyed the flat northern shore of the river, and the treacherous hills on the other side. "From what I saw, I figure Red Hand has been waiting right here for at least a day, laying for us. And unless that Apache has seen the holy light, I'd say he's got us surrounded right now, and when he gets good and ready, he'll ride down."

Reese touched a grimy hand to his stringy hair. "My throat's mighty raw, Lieutenant. Now that I let you know the situation, I'm going to mosey back and find my bottle of whisky." He trotted off toward the wagon and the men.

Cullen's stomach went cold. If Red Hand had a hundred braves somewhere close, the cavalry platoon was helplessly outnumbered. Florey was fuming.

"Lieutenant, it seems to me we've been sold out—again."

CULLEN nodded. The platoon's trip to Brent City to fetch Martha Pierpont, daugher of the colonel who commanded Fort Morris, had been carried off as secretly as possible. Cullen felt an additional sting of worry, because he had waited for three long years while Martha finished school in the East, so that she could come out here and marry him. And now to have her exposed to danger like this. . . .

Two patrols from the fort had been wiped out in the previous month—ambushed. Col. Pierpoint suspected that there was treachery involved. Someone on the post had informed Red Hand of the cavalry's movements. Six months before, Red Hand had raided a bullion train to the south, and carried off enough silver to pay an informer handsomely.

"You think Reese could be lying?" Florey asked.

"I don't see why he would." A figure suddenly outlined against the crest of a hill across the river. Cullen's mouth tightened. "No. Look there." Florey turned his head in time to see the Apache duck back out of sight.

"Just letting us know what we're in for." Florey spat and thought for a moment. "Somebody sold us out. I have a notion it might be Reese."

"You may be right," said Cullen. "He was thrown off the fort several times for drunkenness. The only reason we took him along this time was that Teeters got himself killed on that last patrol. Reese was the only scout left. Col. Pierpont had some strong suspicions about Reese, but we couldn't prove anything.

We might have done better without having a scout."

Florey noted the darkening river. "It's almost dark. We could make a run for it. Apaches probably won't hit us now until dawn."

Cullen turned the words over in his mind, and then shook his head. "No. Even if we ditched Martha's wagon, we'd still have a hard time carrying her in a running fight. And if I know Red Hand, he'll fight in the dark if we try to crash his lines. I'd say our best bet was to wait until morning. At least we can make a stand here. If we got strung out in those hills we'd never make it."

Florey nodded. "We can send a rider to the fort and get relief by morning. That way, Red Hand might turn tail."

Cullen started to tell Florey the secret he alone knew. Sending a rider to the fort wouldn't be necessary. But Florey, never one to stand still, wheeled his mount and called "I'll spread the word." He galloped off to the rear.

Cullen turned to watch him go, and caught sight of Martha on the wagon seat. He thought of Sgt. Daniel Beal, and picked out the black-haired trooper from among the others of the platoon. As if Red Hand weren't enough!

Problems concerning his fiance had arisen to plague Cullen too, and he felt a violent jealousy of Beal. Now he saw Beal approaching the wagon, and Cullen kneed his horse forward at a fast clip. Instinct made him return to protect what was his.

As Cullen rode back, he watched Martha. She was a good-looking young woman, in spite of the dust on her hair and clothing. Nothing could quite conceal her rich figure, and the clear blue eyes that could be so fiery. He felt, bitterly, that he was in danger of losing her.

He had courted her three years ago when he was stationed in the East, and had won her promise of marriage. In the interval since he saw her last, he had written her many times, but he had never been good with words, and he always felt he could never really tell her on paper how much he loved her. Besides, he was acutely conscious of his own un-handsome appearance.

SGT. DANIEL BEAL was the ladies' man of the platoon: young, brash, black-haired and whip-tongued. He had been paying a lot of attention to Martha during the trip from Brent City. Nothing familiar or improper, just a joke or a casual remark or a glance that no one would misinterpret, except a man as fiercely jealous of his woman as Cullen. On top of that, Martha seemed cool, almost afraid of Cullen. He had the queasy feeling that the three years had changed her feelings for him. He feared that if she saw Beal too much, she might easily forget about her first promise.

Cullen rode toward the wagon against the strong wind. The hat of one of the troopers slipped from the man's head. It sailed past Cullen, flipped by the wind, and skated across the surface of the river.

Cullen reined up at the wagon. Martha said, "Ash, Sgt. Florey just told me about the Apaches."

"Appears we're in a bit of a spot, Lieutenant," Beal said with faint mockery.

"Nothing that we can't get out of," Cullen retorted, riled.

"I always did want to be buried in the southwest," Beal said with a cocky grin. "How about you, Miss Pierpoint?"

"Beal, you talk too much," Cullen snapped.

"Ash!" Martha began.

Beal shrugged. "I was only passing the time of day with your wife-to-be, Lieutenant. I didn't know that was against regulations." His greenish eyes made it clear that he knew Cullen was jealous of him, feared him.

"Get back with the men," Cullen said.

"Yes, *sir*," Beal said smartly, yet with perceptible mockery. "Excuse me, Miss Pierpoint. We'll continue our conversation another time. I enjoyed it."

"Move, Beal!"

Beal snickered under his breath, and walked away. Martha's eyes glinted with anger. "Ash, you had no right to dress him down like that."

"He's got a wise mouth, Martha. I can't allow that."

"You seem to pick on Sgt. Beal more than on anyone else."

Cullen felt his anger getting the best of him. "Does that bother you, Martha?"

"Frankly, it does."

"I'm very sorry," he said icily, "but I'm in command."

"Not of me, you aren't," she shot back. She pressed her forehead wearily. "Oh, Ash, I don't know what's happened between us. You're using your authority as an officer to take out petty jealousy."

"Do I have any reason to be jealous?"

"If you're going to talk that way," she raged, "yes, perhaps you do!"

Cullen's hand constricted on the reins. "I want you to stay inside your wagon. I can't have you running loose with Red Hand close." She started to protest, but he added quickly, "That's an order, and I'll post a guard if I have to."

"I suppose you think you'll post a guard outside our house when we're married!" she said bitterly. "Well, that won't be necessary. Because I don't know if I want to be your wife, Ash Cullen!"

She vanished into the shadowy interior of the wagon, and Cullen heard her foot strike angrily against the side of one of the two trunks that carried a huge collection of dresses, petticoats and other feminine apparel.

Bitterly, Cullen wheeled his horse, picketed it, and took a drink from his canteen. A private said to him, "We got a fight on our hands in the morning, sir?"

"Appears that way," he said, not thinking of his words.

THE night came on. Cullen allowed small supper fires to be made, because Red Hand certainly knew their position by this time. Cullen drank only a cup of bitter coffee, without enjoying it, and then walked down by the dark river to think. A burst of laughter rose up, and he turned to look. Beal was laughing with some cronies in the firelight.

Cullen felt intense hatred as he watched the good-looking young soldier. Clenching his fists, he walked on toward the river bank. Against the rush of the waters came what sounded like the cry of a night bird from the hills on the other side. But that bird has a human throat, Cullen thought grimly.

Cullen felt that their position was fairly safe. He alone knew of the secret agreement he had made with Col. Pierpoint before leaving the fort. Pierpoint had promised to send two additional platoons out to meet Cullen, provided Cullen did not return on schedule. Red Hand's activity in the neighborhood made this advisable.

Well, the storm had slowed them up, so Pierpoint's men should be starting from Fort Morris about now. They should reach Arrow River by dawn without even riding hard, so actually help was already on the way. Three platoons would be a good match for Red Hand.

Pierpoint had kept his plan secret because of the very sort of betrayal that had brought Red Hand to Arrow River. The men didn't know that help was coming, however, and Cullen decided that he ought to tell them.

He was startled by seeing Sgt. Florey striding out of the darkness. "What is it, Florey?"

"I wondered if you'd forgotten, sir. We ought to send a rider back to the fort. One man can just about make it there and back by the time dawn comes."

"Do you think a man could get through?" Cullen asked absently.

"Nine out of ten chances are against it," Florey said grimly. "But on that one chance . . . well, he might make it."

Cullen almost told of the plan, but suddenly he thought of Martha, and he heard Beal laughing again, and he felt sick and dizzy for a moment. Then his mouth tightened and he started back toward the camp.

"You're right, Florey." They strode into the lighted area. "Beal! Sgt. Beal!"

Beal walked forward lazily. "You wanted me, Lieutenant?"

"That's right. We need help. You're going to ride to the fort and bring back two or three platoons. You may not get through, but we've got to chance it."

"Why pick me?" Beal asked. "Any special reason?"

"You're a good man," Cullen said smoothly. "That's reason enough."

"Oh, I see." Beal shrugged. "Well, I'll give it a try."

"He's mighty unconcerned for a man about to lose his hair," Reese said thickly from his position near the fire. "He hasn't a prayer of getting through that line of redskins."

"I'm sure the lieutenant is well aware of the nature of the situation," Beal said mockingly. "Orders are orders."

"Out with the fires," Cullen said. "It's got to be dark when he rides out."

The men jumped to extinguish the embers. Cullen felt almost drunk, because he knew what he was doing and he wanted it that way. He wanted to keep Martha, and he wouldn't let Beal stop him. He watched woodenly while Beal collected his rifle and gear and saddled up his horse.

Beal vanished from the camp like a black ghost. The river bank lay in shadow, for there was no moon up. They listened. The Apaches made their bird cries across the whispering river. Once they heard a brief flurry of hoofbeats, but the wind was wrong for them to hear much more, and the sound soon died.

SENTRIES were posted, and the men talked quietly of the coming engagement, then drifted off into silence. Ten minutes had passed since Beal had ridden out. Cullen's hands felt cold and sweaty. He sought out his saddlebags, opened one, and took out a bottle of whisky. Tipping it back, he let the fiery liquor course down his throat. He took a second drink, and then corked the bottle with a savage twist of his wrist. He thrust it back in the bag and started to walk.

He passed Martha's wagon. He did not think that she was asleep. Even his campaign-hardened men found it difficult to rest on the eve of a battle. He almost called her name, but something held him back. He walked on, his head low, his mind filled with confused, agonized thoughts.

He went toward the river again, as if drawn in that direction. The wind almost tore his hat from his head. Abruptly, he began to tremble.

My God, he thought, what did I do? What did I do?

Reese was right. He had murdered Beal. He had let his emotions, his fears, his jealousies run away with him, and he had sent Beal across the river on a fool's errand, hoping, praying that Beal would be killed. Help would arrive before dawn, whether Beal reached the fort or not. Suddenly, a new thought struck him.

What had been in his mind? What had possibly deluded him into thinking that he could get away with it? When Col. Pierpoint arrived, the word would get out that the arrival of the two platoons had been known to Cullen in advance. Then Martha and his men would know that he hadn't needed to send Beal at all. She would know that he had done what amounted to murder, because of her. And he knew Martha was not the kind of woman who could ever love a man who had done such a thing.

You fool, he said to himself. You damn fool.

Now, though, what could he do? He had wrecked things completely.

Wait! He still could go after Beal, bring him back! He estimated that not more than twenty minutes had passed since Beal had departed, and it would take a man a good hour to cross those hills silently, between the Apache lines. The least Cullen could do was to make amends for the crime he had committed. He could try to stave off Beal's death, if the soldier weren't already dead.

Cullen raced for the picket line and saddled his horse. He checked his Colt and headed for the river bank. As he passed the fringe of the camp he heard someone call his name, and he pulled up short. Martha came running through the darkness.

He called softly, "I told you to stay inside."

"Ash, listen to me! Sergeant Florey said—"

There was no time. He waved her back, wheeling his horse for the river. Black compulsions drove him after Beal.

He thundered down the shore and into the water. His horse fought across to the opposite bank, and Cullen drove him forward at a gallop for about a quarter of a mile, to the cover of some large boulders. There Cullen dismounted and crouched back in the darkness, Colt drawn, waiting.

The noise of his crossing should attract the Apaches, if they had sentries posted down here. He waited for three minutes. No sound disturbed the night, except the faint keening of the wind blowing toward him. The cavalry camp on the opposite shore was indistinguishable.

He mounted up again and moved higher into the foothills.

IN ANOTHER ten minutes he reached the narrow cut that would have offered Beal quickest passage through the hills. Cullen dismounted, tied his horse, and moved behind spindly shrubs, finally bellying down as he neared the center of the cut. He could see a figure outlined against the sky, a deeper black than the black of the night.

Breathing hard, his nostrils choked with blowing dust, Cullen crept forward. He replaced his Colt in the holster and drew the knife he always carried at his belt. Closer, closer—the wind roared louder here, filling his ears.

Six yards from the Apache, he gathered his legs under him and sprang forward.

The Apache heard him coming at the last moment, whirled, and opened his mouth to yell. Cullen's dive sent the Apache sprawling, and Cullen jammed his free hand over the other's mouth. The Apache sank his teeth deep into Cullen's hand as he struggled to get his own knife free. Cullen whipped back his right arm and drove it down, twisting the knife as it entered the Apache's belly. He struck two more times, and then staggered to his feet. The night was still quiet.

The Apache's horse, tied close by, stirred skittishly. Cullen ran forward and tried to quiet it. Only then did he notice the second horse. He frowned in the darkness. The second horse had a cavalry saddle.

Cullen was thunderstruck. If Beal had been killed, the Apaches would hardly have bothered to capture his horse. Even had they done that, they surely would have sent the cavalry animal galloping back across the river to inform the soldiers that Beal had failed. The two horses, tethered together so peacefully, started a dark suspicion in Cullen's mind.

He looked around and noticed for the first time a faint glow, as of firelight, seeping through an opening between two rocks. He managed to squeeze through the opening. Beyond, the glow grew brighter, a blackish-red haze that hung over the crest of a low hill not a hundred yards away. Cullen moved carefully toward the hill's top and, as he did, he began to hear the sound of voices. With his heart thudding in his chest, he bellied up to the top of the rise and peered out through a thin screen of brush.

Below, in a cup-like depression, the Apaches were gathered around a dying fire. Cullen recognized Red Hand immediately. And seated on the ground, drinking from a whisky bottle, sat Beal.

Beal laughed, talking to the Apaches in their own tongue, which Cullen understood. Beal was saying, "Perfect! I thought for a while you would have to 'kill' me in the morning. I didn't much relish the idea of lying on the ground through the whole fight. But my lieutenant, damn his soul, thought I was making time with his woman."

"Beal good with white woman," Red Hand said with heavy humor. "What Red Hand pay Beal make Beal much man with white woman."

"You take her," Beal said, shaking his head. "Oh, she was nice enough, but she was set to marry that Cullen all along. Anyway, Cullen told me to ride for help, so I had a perfect excuse. I'll cut myself up a little, turn up at the fort tomorrow and say I was unable to get through as quick as was necessary." He laughed again. "Col. Pierpoint won't get to Arrow River until all the soldier boys lose their hair." He slapped Red Hand's shoulder. "And you, chief, will have the colonel's white daughter. That'll be a nice blow for the old gent, won't it?"

SO BEAL had been the one selling out all along, taking Red Hand's stolen silver. That explained why Beal had seemed so unconcerned about his dangerous mission. And Cullen felt the sting of remorse even more acutely as he heard Beal's statement about Martha. Now, though, his attention was sickeningly riveted on something that Red Hand was saying.

"Help already on way."

"What?" Beal blinked. "What's that?"

"Two platoons left fort at sunset. Scouts saw. Another hundred braves holding them. The spirits do not like fighting in the darkness, but I do not want help to come to soldiers beyond river. Two platoons will not arrive for many hours after dawn, if they arrive at all."

"The hell!" Beal exclaimed. "I wonder if Cullen knew."

Cullen felt the bottom drop out of every-

thing. If what Red Hand said was true, Col. Pierpoint's relief would never make it to Arrow River by dawn, and his men—and Martha—could not hope to stand up for long against Red Hand's superior forces. He had to get back to the encampment. He drew his legs up under him, preparing to rise.

A scuff of feet on shale behind him made him turn and drag leather. The Apache who had approached up the slope flung the knife, and the blade tore a chunk from Cullen's arm. Cullen fired, and the Apache tumbled backward down the slope. Cullen realized for one dizzy instant that he was outlined perfectly in the glow of the firelight from the depression below.

And Beal spotted him. "Cullen!"

With a guttural laugh of satisfaction, Beal lurched to his feet and drew his Colt. Cullen had a second's advantage, and this time the killing was justifiable. Cullen's Colt crashed and Beal sprawled forward across the fire, embers catching in his hair. His scream was ghoulish.

But now Red Hand and the others were aroused, coming up the sides of the depression after him. He scrambled between the opening in the rocks, whirled, and got off a shot that stopped the first of the pursuers. There was no reason now to exercise caution. He clambered onto Beal's horse, still tied in the cut, and rode toward the river.

Behind him in the darkness he could hear other horses. He bent low, wind tearing in his face, and forgot about the firing from behind. His one concern was to reach camp again, and marshall his men for the attack that now threatened to wipe them out.

As he neared the river, three Apaches cut toward him out of the rocks at his left. A lance sailed by, inches from his head. He fired two shots and one of the riders went down. His horse plunged into the river, raced across. A few rifle shots followed him, and he heard one shot from the cavalry camp.

He pounded up the shore toward the camp, yelling, "Don't fire, dammit. This is Cullen!"

His men were out of their bedrolls and returning the Indians' fire until Cullen's shout called a halt. "We'll need all the ammunition we've got in a few hours." He climbed from his horse as Florey ran up.

"Lieutenant, what happened? We couldn't understand why you rode out."

"Explanations later," Cullen retorted. "I found Beal in Red Hand's camp. Beal was the one taking Red Hand's stolen bullion, selling us out. I killed him before I got out of there."

"Good for you," exclaimed a semi-drunken Reese. "I always did think that Beal was too cussed pretty to be any good."

"I still don't see why you rode out." Florey persisted.

"Forget it, Sergeant, for now!" Cullen ordered. "We've got to dig in. We're going to have a hell of a fight on our hands, come dawn."

He strode off, giving orders. He thought to himself, not so soft or so easy as you thought before, eh, Cullen? No one to fight your battles for you. If you're any good, you'll think of something to pull your men out of this tight.

BUT Cullen condemned himself with the thought that the best they could do was make a good stand. He could see no way to win.

As he passed Martha's wagon, she called to him again. He could not face her. "Later, Martha. Stick inside the wagon."

Through the hours that followed, Cullen and his men worked feverishly, completing the digging half begun before night fell. Gradually they all became silent, working with a sense of desperation. The wind still blew furiously behind their backs across the river, but the opposite shore lay silent. Damn Red Hand, Cullen thought as he worked, he knows he's got us. False dawn came. Then shortly after, the sky in the east began to gray.

Cullen and his men were dug in a quarter of a mile from the river bank, in crude trenches, behind boulders and brush and whatever additional meager cover the barren landscape afforded. Cullen lay with his rifle barrel across a fallen piece of timber, and his pistol was at his side. Sweat ran down his forehead, although the morning air was chilly.

Red Hand and his braves—Reese had been right, there were nearly a hundred—came slowly down from the hills in a straggling, uneven line. And then Red Hand raised his lance defiantly, and the Apaches began to

ride. They plunged toward the river and into it, firing their contraband rifles. Cullen's men answered the fire.

The charge thundered up the northern shore of the river, with Cullen's men dropping a fair number, but not enough. The screams of the Apaches made a shrill cacophony in the morning air. A hundred yards from the forward lines of the cavalry, Red Hand turned his braves and retreated across the river.

Florey cursed. "They love to drag it out, don't they?"

Cullen made a quick count. He had lost five men. The second charge cut down six more. Cullen's troops killed twice that number and more, but Red Hand's strength was still hardly diminished by those losses. Cullen lay sweating, re-loading his rifle, the knife wound throbbing in his arm, thinking, this last one will be it.

Instinctively, Cullen turned to glance at Martha's wagon, only half sheltered behind some brush. It was too far back to be heavily damaged. Only one arrow protruded from its side. Somehow, in a mad relief from the tension in him, he had to laugh at the thought of Martha in there with her two trunks full of Eastern finery. She hadn't imagined, when she left the East, what she'd be in for.

Suddenly, his thoughts were jerked back to those two trunks.

The idea was fantastic, wild, but—yes, the wind was right, strong enough, and if he could get to Red Hand and kill him—

"Florey!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you ever try to fight Apaches with a woman's petticoats?"

"With a woman's petticoats? No sir."

"We're going to try. Come on!"

Martha was still safely hidden in the wagon. Cullen and Florey and two others hoisted the trunks out and bore them back to the line of soldiers. Cullen opened the trunks and began passing out every article they held, while he explained his plan. One of the petticoats got away from him, and the wind whirled it up and sent it flying into the air over the shore, until it finally fell into the river. Florey watched it and shook his head in wonderment. Reese guffawed.

"It's so silly it's plumb ridiculous, but damned if I don't think it'll work."

THE Apaches had gathered now, and were riding toward the river for a final charge. Cullen lay crouched, with two voluminous petticoats beside him. He thought idly that if someone ever recorded this battle in a cavalry history book, the writer might laugh at it. But from the grim, almost prayerful, faces of his men, he knew that they realized full well the stakes behind this strange gamble.

"Keep them close to the ground when you let them go," Cullen reminded his men.

With a cruel yell, the Apaches plunged into the water.

They were halfway between the river and the troops when Cullen shouted his order. His men came to their feet and tossed the clothing into the air. Some pieces fell back, but most of them were caught by the wind and kited forward through the air. A strange flying cloud of female clothing suddenly engulfed the charging Apaches and their mounts. Horses screamed and tumbled. Braves flailed clumsily, trying to free themselves.

Scarcely seconds after the peculiar cloud sailed away from the cavalry lines, Cullen's men were up and running. They tore into the confused melee of Apache braves and ponies, using knives and pistols and rifles. The Apaches, unprepared for the sudden attack, went down in twos and threes. But Cullen knew the advantage would not last for long. Already many of the warriors had disentangled themselves.

Cullen put a bullet through one brave's stomach, clubbed at the head of a pony to get it out of the way, and then he leaped and dragged Red Hand from his horse's back. Red Hand cut savagely with his knife, missed, and Cullen blew two holes in the Indian's chest. Then Cullen took Red Hand's own knife and worked swiftly. He caught up a fallen lance and, with a hideous yell, raised it aloft, Red Hand's head dripping gorily at its peak.

The Apaches turned then, and retreated, demoralized, as the fire of the cavalry cut down even more of the fleeing numbers. Cullen dropped the lance and surveyed the dead, many of the men he had known well. Reese

staggered toward him, left leg dripping blood, and tugged at his arm.

Reese grinned through a bloody beard, pointing. "Where in thunder did they come from?"

Cullen turned bleary eyes toward the hills across the river. The remaining Apaches had ridden straight into the guns of two bedraggled platoons of cavalry coming from the south. Within minutes, not a living Apache could be seen anywhere on the river banks.

Cullen watched grimly as the platoons rode across. Col. Pierpoint himself was at the head. Cullen turned and walked swiftly toward Martha's wagon. She was already clambering down, and he took her in his arms, wordlessly, his tongue choked and speechless.

At last he said, "Don't talk. Before your father gets here, I have to tell you something." And quickly, with each word bringing pain, he told her how he had sent Beal out when he knew help was on its way.

She looked up at him. "Ash."

"Yes?"

"We've got to have time to learn to know each other again. Last night, before you rode out after Beal, when I tried to talk to you, I'd just learned from Sgt. Florey that you'd sent Beal. I was terribly angry, because you'd made so much out of so little. Oh, I know it's partly my fault, the strangeness of this country, but I see things differently, now that I know you went after Beal on your own, and not because I wanted you to. And the fact that Beal was a traitor––"

CULLEN shook his head. "That makes no difference. I wanted to murder him. If it had been anyone but Beal, I would have. All my life I have to remember what I did, so that I never do it again."

She glanced around. "Father's coming."

Cullen nodded. "I'll have to tell him, too." She started to protest. "No, I have to. Wait here." He turned and walked toward Pierpoint, who was dismounting.

Col. Pierpoint extended his hand. "Well done, Lieutenant. I see that my daughter is alive and safe. Thank God for that. Some of Red Hand's braves surprised us, three hours out of the fort. They had us pinned down for a time."

Wearily, Cullen interrupted. "Colonel, could you walk off with me for a minute? There's something I've got to talk to you about." Minutes later, Cullen finished his story. "The men will have to be told. Florey was questioning me last night. I just don't think I'm fit to command any more, sir."

Pierpoint's gray eyes were thoughtful. "We'll leave it up to the men. Do you want to tell them?"

"I'd rather you would, sir."

"Very well."

Cullen stood watching Martha, listening to the colonel's voice. He stood apart from the men so that he could not see them, until he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Reese and Florey.

"We're a committee of two, sir," Florey said haltingly. "The colonel told us. You could have gotten out of it some way, dodged the whole thing, but the fact that you didn't kind of puts a different light on it. I guess what you did wasn't right, but it's something we can understand." He stumbled over his words. "All I mean to say, Lieutenant, is that any of us could have done it in your shoes. Nobody's going to hold it against you."

Reese grinned hideously. "I wouldn't have messed around, myself; I'd have just shot the dirty son in the back."

Cullen said nothing. His un-handsome face showed his emotions.

Col. Pierpoint rejoined them. "I just heard the story of the petticoats." He chuckled. "Ingenious. I'd say that bit of strategy makes you fitter than almost any of us to command men in this country. Come on, I want to say hello to my daughter."

Cullen said, "So do I, sir," and they walked toward the wagon together.

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# Forty Mile Fence

*By Dean Owen*

*Kate asked Nina, "Did he really say he was in love with me?"*

*THE STORY SO FAR:* CLAY JANNER and JOE ALFORD return from a long trip to Mexico—during which they traded guns for cattle—to find that Alford's wife, NINA, thinks he's dead and is about to marry rancher BYRD ELKHART to keep him from putting up a fence that would hamper the other ranchers. Clay and Alford join the other ranchers—BUCK BOGARTH, TOM SHANLEY, and LEO REESE—in a pool to do something about Elkhart's

**fence, but they split on the issue of whether or not to fight. Meanwhile Clay has fought with two of Elkhart's men, LON PERRY and RUSS HAGEN, who had accused him of making a play for Nina. Alford half believes the accusation, and rancher KATE FRENCH, who is attracted to Clay, is afraid he may start a range war. Actually it is Nina who is making a play for Clay. Elkhart finds them together and, jealous, tells his men to beat up Clay.**

## PART THREE

CLAY sagged on the ropes, bent over, dazedly watching a bright pattern in the dust and realizing numbly that it was his blood. He was aware of Nina's screaming, but the sound was only faint in the thunder in his own head.

They hauled him upright and, when Hagen came slashing in with his fists, and Clay tried to fight, the two men with the ropes kept jerking Clay off balance. He went down hard, and the world seemed tilted and strange and very far away. Then he was on his feet again, and now consciousness returned like a blow. The ends of the two ropes had been passed to Perry and Russ Hagen, who had both mounted their horses.

Elkhart said, "How are you at running a foot race, Janner?"

Nina tried to claw free of Elkhart's arm, holding her. "You'll kill him!" she screamed.

"I intend to," Elkhart said flatly.

"Please, Byrd." She began to sob.

"I've loved you, Nina, ever since you were a kid. When you married Alford, I gave up. But when he went to Mexico I saw a chance. I figured he might still be alive, so I got Perry to fix up that story about the Mexican who saw Joe executed. By showing you Joe's watch the feller got from a Mexican officer, we figured you'd believe he was dead. If Joe ever did come back from Mexico you'd already be my wife."

"And you'd have murdered Joe," Nina said, and trembled as if taken with a sudden chill. "And to think I even considered marrying a man like you."

Elkhart laughed harshly. "I wouldn't marry you now, no matter what—after finding you out here with a no-good like Clay Janner."

"But you're wrong, Byrd. It wasn't like you thought."

"I tell you I watched you through the glasses."

Clay gripped the two ropes, easing the pressure of the nooses at his waist. His ribs ached, and the flesh at his waistline had been rubbed raw by the hemp. He saw big Russ Hagen grinning back from his saddle. Fifteen yards to his left was Lon Perry. They took dallies around their saddle horns with the rope.

"Let's go," Perry said.

They started at a walk, then increased to a lope. Clay was forced to run and, in his high-heeled boots on the uneven ground, he nearly stumbled.

The inside of his mouth was dry and had the metallic taste of blood. There was a pounding pain in the back of his skull. He knew what would happen once the horses were put to a gallop. He'd be forced to run faster and faster, fighting for balance. And finally he would lose it.

A picture of a rider he had once seen, after he had been dragged with a foot caught in a stirrup, flashed before Clay's eyes. The rider's face had been gone, and so had the flesh on his back and shoulders.

He saw the spurs dig in. The horses jerked him forward, and he tried to run. He lost his grip on the ropes, and felt as if a sudden weight were at his head. He was bent forward, and in another moment he would pinwheel at the end of the ropes. That would send him crashing head first to the rocky ground.

He suddenly saw Hagen rear up in the saddle and jerk aloft his right hand. Then the sharp crack of a rifle reached them. Hagen pitched loosely to the ground and the horse veered, pulling Clay off his feet. Before he could be dragged, the horse piled up from another shot.

Clay was on his knees, sobbing for breath. Lon Perry had pulled up his own mount and sat with hands lifted, looking at someone back in the brush.

Hagen was stirring on the ground and he finally sat up, holding his arm and looking pale and shaken.

KATE FRENCH rode down the slant, holding a rifle. Her face was dead white under her dark hair. She looked at Hagen on the ground, and Perry in the saddle.

"I'm only sorry I had to shoot the horse," she said. "But I wouldn't sit by and see a man dragged to death." Her gaze sharpened, and she gestured at the Arrow crew. "Ride out of here," she ordered. Then, as an afterthought, "And leave Clay's gun."

The man who had taken the weapon let it fall to the ground. Elkhart released Nina. "You got a break today, Janner, but you won't live out the month. I promise that."

They rode out, Elkhart in the lead, Hagen riding double behind Lon Perry.

When they had gone, Nina began to weep. "Thank God, Kate. How in the world did you find us?"

"I followed you," Kate said severely. She glanced at Clay, who sat on the ground, too spent even to remove the ropes from his waist. "I hoped to prevent you from doing something foolish with this man, Nina."

Nina moved wearily to Kate's side. "You don't have to worry, Kate. He's in love with you."

Clay looked up and saw that Kate's face had gone slack in surprise. Kate stared at Nina Alford, then swung her gaze to Clay. For a moment there was softness in her eyes; then her lips curled in contempt.

"Don't let him fool you, Nina," she said. "He loves nobody but himself."

But she did come over and give Clay a hand up. He got unsteadily to his feet. "No matter what you think of me," he said, "I owe you my life."

Kate looked away. "Let's hope Joe Alford doesn't find out what happened here today."

"You can be sure Elkhart will spread the word." Clay said wearily.

"Then leave this country before you're forced to take a gun to him to defend yourself," Kate urged.

Clay shook his head, and the effort brought a stab of pain to his eyes. "Nina tried to get me to ride out once. I didn't do it for her. I won't do it for you."

She stood aside when he started for his horse. He stumbled and went to his knees, then passed out cold. The two women looked down at him.

"He took a terrible beating," Nina said.

"How could you turn from your husband to a—a gunrunner?" Kate demanded.

Nina gave a hopeless shrug. "Maybe it was like Clay told me—he was a stranger and it made an easy choice, so I wouldn't have to decide between Joe or Elkhart."

Kate frowned and looked at the unconscious man on the ground. Then, as if reaching a decision, she wet a handkerchief from a canteen and sponged the grime from Clay's face. She sat holding his head in her lap.

Then she looked up at Nina and said, almost belligerently, "Did he really say he was in love with me?"

"Yes."

For a long moment Kate sat holding the wet handkerchief. Then she said, "You get on home, Nina. Tell Joe some story, so he hears it first from you. It will take some of the ugliness out of it before he hears it from another source."

Nina moved away. "What about Clay?"

"I'll take care of him."

Clay dimly remembered that ride, with Kate walking her horse close beside his own mount, half holding him in the saddle. Then he awakened in a room with curtained windows. He felt sheets against his skin, and weakly contemplated this unexpected luxury.

A door opened, and Kate entered with a bowl of soup. It was the first time he had seen her in a dress, and the effect was startling. She looked younger and more feminine. She must have sensed his thoughts, for her eyes showed pleasure. He sat up in the bed and suddenly realized he was naked. Color mounted to his cheeks.

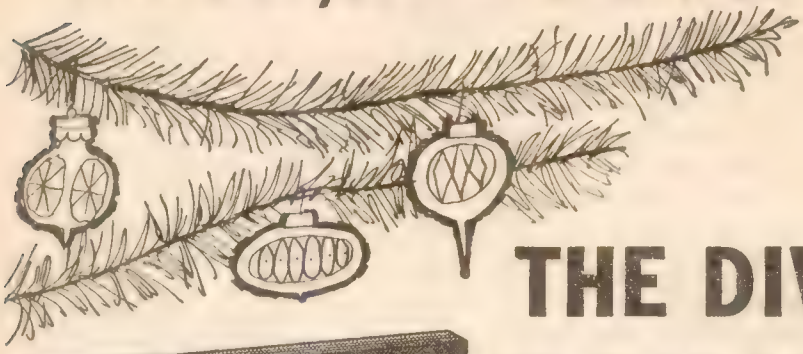
Kate gave a short laugh. "One of the ranch hands undressed you." Then she added soberly, "But if there had been nobody else here, I could have done it. I had a father and a brother. This isn't the first time we've had violence around here."

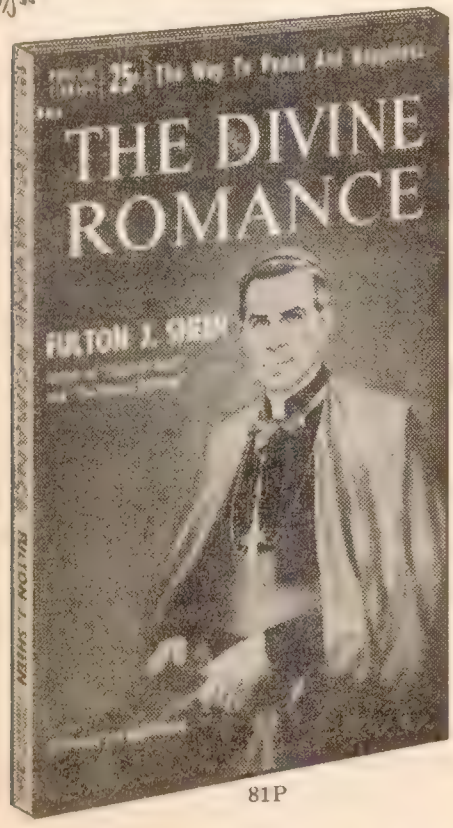
"Kind of self-sufficient, aren't you?"

The soup was good, and it warmed him. It seemed that already he could feel a return of his strength. She sat in a chair next to the bed. When he finished his soup, she took the

*(Turn to page 106)*

# *The Perfect Christmas Gift!*



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empty dish. Then he groped for her hand.

"I got off on the wrong foot with you, Kate, but I'm glad we're friends now."

A faint flush touched her cheeks, and she glanced down at the empty dish in her lap. "So am I," she said softly.

THEN the old rebellion began to burgeon, and he felt the invisible bonds closing about him. A beginning panic was in him, and he sought desperately to escape what he sensed was a trap.

"Nina's a lonely woman, and she's all mixed up." He made himself laugh. "Why, for a while she figured she wanted to run off with me. That shows how crazy a woman can get."

"I know," Kate agreed. "All women are a little crazy when it comes to some certain man." Her voice trailed off, and there was a deep silence in the room.

"I made Nina come to her senses, not that she wouldn't have anyway, but—" Clay stared through the window toward the yard, where he could see the corral he had helped repair. "Well, I told her I was in love with you. I hope you don't mind, Kate."

She jerked up her head, stared at him a moment, then got stiffly to her feet. "No, I don't mind. Any lie is all right if it saves a woman from making a fool of herself."

She left the room and he had a sudden urge to call her back, to ignore the trap that had nearly closed about him. But some perversity made him remain silent. Later, when she did not return, he rose, unsteady on his feet, and managed to dress.

He belted on his gun. His shirt had been torn in the fight, and one heel was missing from a boot. He'd have to ride to Reeder Wells and pick up some new gear.

He found Kate in the kitchen, tasting something out of a long-handled spoon. She turned her back deliberately, and replaced the lid on a pot steaming on the range.

"You shouldn't be up yet," she said coldly.

"Thought I'd better clear out of here. I've already put you to enough trouble."

"No trouble. I'd do the same for anyone."

That stung him, and he wanted to hurt her. Then the feeling went out of him. "Kate—"

But she cut him off. "Last night Joe Alford rode by. He demanded to see you. I told him you weren't here. I thought he might come, so I had the men hide your horse."

"Then Joe heard the story about Nina and me."

She nodded her sleek dark head. "He was wearing a gun. I thought I'd warn you."

He thanked her and started for the door.

She said, "I've known Joe Alford for four years, and I've never seen him so angry that he'd try to kill a man—not until last night."

He bit his lip and debated a moment. Then he said suddenly, "Kate, if I'm lucky and can sell my half of the herd—"

"You can go to Montana," she cut in. "There's free grass, and no woman to tie you down."

He looked at her sharply, remembering that those were almost the exact words he had once used on Joe Alford.

"Don't you see, Kate, I've fought this thing for so long that I don't give in easily." He lifted his hands. "When I was twenty, I fell in love with a girl. I planned to marry her. So did a lot of other men, I found out later. It soured me."

Kate said. "There's a cattle buyer named Ruskin at Reeder Wells. He'll be there tonight only. If you hurry, you might make a deal for your herd."

A muscle twitched on Clay's unshaven cheek. "You didn't hear one word I said."

Kate gave him a thin smile. "It was something about a girl. I didn't pay much attention."

He started for her, then halted. She gripped the big spoon and hefted it, watching him. "You're a fancy man with the ladies," she said. "You don't have much looks, but you do have charm. I guess that's what you'd call it. Anyway, up in this country we don't see many men like you."

He gave her a faint grin. "It's us Texans, I guess."

"Texan or not, you don't make any impression on me," she said. "And if you try to manhandle me like you did the other day in the Spade yard I'll—"

"I only grabbed you by the wrist."

"I remember all too well. And it's still

sore." She leaned forward, her eyes bright with anger. "Do you know what I talked to Russ Hagen about that day in the yard? I said I'd like to see you taken down a peg or two. Not with a gun, but with fists. I'd heard that Russ likes to fight."

Clay stood rigid. "You wasted some ammunition yesterday," he said savagely. "You shot Hagen and his horse. If you hate me so much, why didn't you let them drag my brains on the ground?"

His brutal words drained her face of color. "Clay, I didn't mean it that way."

BUT Clay had whirled for the door. He stomped across the yard, rousted the men out of the bunkhouse, and told them to get his horse.

Then he rode north, giving Spade headquarters a wide berth. In Reeder Wells he found a store still open after dark, and he bought boots and a new shirt. After donning these, he looked around to see if any Arrow men were in Fierro's. Satisfied none of the six inside were Elkhart riders, Clay entered. He had two quick drinks while Fierro and his few customers studied Clay's bruised face and shook their heads. From their silence, Clay knew they had heard the story.

"Nina Alford's a good woman," Clay said to Fierro, but loud enough so the others could hear. "You remember that."

Fierro shrugged. "*Si,* I remember."

"Then remember this too. I'll kill any man who says different."

This time Fierro did not shrug. He studied Clay's eyes and said, "*Si,* this I believe."

"Now tell me where I can find a cattle buyer named Ruskin."

Fierro pointed out a plump man playing poker with a cowhand at a corner table. Clay introduced himself and Ruskin, a short, well-fed man in a brown suit, shook his hand.

Taking a rear table with the buyer, Clay told the man that Kate French had suggested they might do business. From the quick gleam in Ruskin's brown eyes, Clay had the feeling the man was eager to contract for beef.

"Around eight hundred head of Chihua-

[*Turn page*]

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huas, eh?" Ruskin said around his cigar when Clay told him about the herd. "I heard you and Alford had more'n that."

"The herd's split. I'm selling my half."

Ruskin winked. "That's the trouble with partners. They always fall out over a pretty woman. I hear that Nina Alford is a looker." He nudged Clay in the ribs. "I reckon you ought to know, eh?"

Clay said, "I guess you didn't hear what I told Fierro a minute ago. I said that I'd kill any man who talked against Nina Alford."

Ruskin regarded him a moment, his face going pale. "I didn't mean anything, Janner. You know how those stories get around."

Clay waved impatiently. "Just so we understand each other."

"And we do. Anybody who'll spread stories about a man's wife—"

"Enough of that," Clay snapped. "You'll take delivery here in Reeder Wells?"

Ruskin spread his well-kept hands, explaining that delivery would have to be made at Las Rosas. Clay frowned, thinking of Elkhart's forty mile fence.

"I've got no crew," Ruskin said, "for driving. I only have my shipping crew, which will be in with the cars in two weeks. I'll be out then to look over your herd and talk business."

Clay said, "Make me an offer now."

"Sight unseen?" Ruskin shook his head. "That's no way to do business."

"Maybe, but this is an unusual case."

"How much will they weigh out?"

"Twelve hundred average."

Ruskin said shrewdly, "They won't average twelve hundred if you drive 'em across the Sink."

"Nobody said I was going across the Sink."

Ruskin sat up straight. "You going through Elkhart's fence?"

Clay stared at him a long moment, then said softly, "How much if the herd averages out like I claim?"

"Thirty dollars."

"You're a bandit," Clay said.

"Thirty-five, but not one red cent more."

Clay leaned across the table and tapped Ruskin on the chest with a long forefinger. "This country's gone to hell. It's a dry year, and Elkhart's beef tally is down. I happen to know. And the basin ranchers are squirming on the hook, some wanting to sell out to Elkhart, others figuring to take the Sink route. Well, there won't be much beef coming out this year. But mine will be there." Clay paused a moment, then added, "You need beef to fulfill your contracts. How about it?"

It had been a gamble, but Clay knew he had scored when Ruskin said, "Forty dollars, and I'll buy a drink to seal the bargain."

THE cattle buyer started to get out of his chair, but at that moment the doors were batted inward by a big man. Clay saw Russ Hagen, right arm in a sling and the hand heavily bandaged, enter the cantina. Hagen's eyes, hard and bright, rested a moment on Clay. Then Hagen came toward Ruskin, who looked at the big man with an air of inquiry.

"I'm looking for Josh Ruskin," Hagen said.

"That's me."

"Got a message from my boss." Hagen came up close, as if to talk to Ruskin. Clay was still in his chair.

Had it not been for the beating yesterday, his wits would have been sharper. But now, when Hagen suddenly turned and pointed the bandaged hand at him, it took a fleeting second to realize its lethal meaning. Then Clay was diving for the floor, as flame and concussion erupted from the bandaged hand. Wood splintered from the wall as four bullets ripped across the spot where Clay Janner had been sitting.

Now on the floor, as Ruskin, on hands and knees, tried to scamper away, Clay drew his gun. He saw Hagen turning to bring the flaming bandages in line, gritting his teeth at what must have been pain from the heat of the cloth the powder charge had set afire.

Clay shot him, risking one bullet at the thickest part of the body. Hagen bent, spinning a little as another bullet found hard bone in his chest. Then he fell with a crash. Clay got up, pulled aside the smouldering bandages, and stomped out the fire. Clutched in Hagen's hand was a Smith & Wesson revolver.

Clay looked at the stunned faces in the cantina. Ruskin had lost his hat, but carried a still-smoking cigar in the center of his dead-

white face. Fierro was crossing himself behind his bar.

"The older a trick," Clay said, indicating the bandaged hand, "the deadlier—because a man forgets."

Sheriff Bert Lynden, who had arrived on the morning stage, and was doing some electioneering in the hotel lobby, hurried to Fierro's when he heard the shots. A tall, fleshless man, the sheriff had an air of uncertainty about him, as if afraid to commit himself to a course of action unless first checking with higher-ups. Clay knew about him and watched the sheriff look over Hagen's body. Then he told the story of the shooting.

Lynden said, "Well, it looks like there's nothing here for me. Hagen worked for Nina Alford, so guess she'll have to hire another rider."

A man at the bar said, "Maybe he used to work for the Alfords, but now he's on Elkhart's payroll. Or he was."

Clay silently cursed the man. He heard Bert Lynden's quick indrawn breath. Under his bushy brows, Lynden's eyes studied Clay.

"Let's hear that story again, Janner," he ordered.

Clay held his temper and again told how Hagen had entered and tried to murder him. The sheriff stroked his pointed chin as if weighing the evidence.

"Kind of unusual circumstances," Lynden said in his official voice. "Reckon I'll have to lock you up, Janner, till I get the straight of it."

The skin tightened over Clay's cheekbones. "You mean until you check with Byrd Elkhart!" .

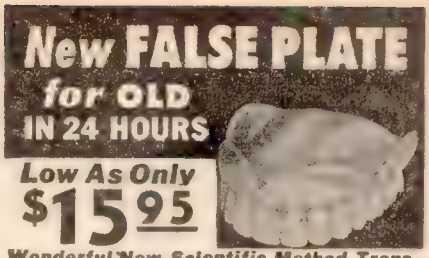
"Now, wait a minute."

"It was all right as long as you thought Hagen still worked for Spade. But when you found out he was an Elkhart man again, you changed your tune."

Lynden's face reddened. "Are you trying to tell me how to conduct my office?"

"Ask any man in this room," Clay said, fury mounting in him, "and you'll learn that Hagen drew first. It's only sheer luck that it's not me there on the floor."

[*Turn page*]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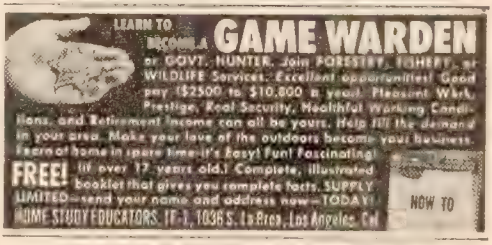
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"That is right, Señor Sheriff," Fierro said.

Josh Ruskin agreed, and so did the other witnesses. Lynden muttered angrily, shot Clay a wicked glance. "I'll let it go that way for now," he said, "but don't get the idea you Texans can come up here and start shooting people."

"How would I go about filing an assault charge against Byrd Elkhart?" Clay asked bluntly, and pointed to the bruises on his face.

Lynden licked his lips. "You'd have to have witnesses."

"I've got 'em," Clay announced.

"It's a serious charge to bring against a man of Byrd Elkhart's standing in the country," the sheriff said lamely.

Clay laughed. "Who pays your salary, the county or Elkhart?"

The sheriff clenched his fists. "I won't take that from you again, Janner." Turning on his heel, he stalked out.

Fierro said, "It will do no good to file the charge against Elkhart. I know."

Clay shrugged. "I just wanted to see the sheriff squirm." He laid a gold piece on the bar. "Maybe you can get somebody to knock a coffin together." He took another look at the dead man on the floor, then lifted his gaze to Ruskin. "See you in Las Rosas," he said, and went outside.

WHEN he saw no sign of any other Arrow riders on the dark street, he surmised that Hagen had probably figured to trap Clay Janner strictly on his own. He saw the sheriff ride out in the general direction of Elkhart's Arrow spread —probably to report, Clay thought glumly.

He had jerky in his saddlebags, and this he ate for his morning meal. By the time he reached Spade range it was full light. Later, he found the black-haired Sam Lennox he had saved from the stampede. Clay told him about the deal with Ruskin, and asked if Sam could get two of the Texas riders to join him in the drive.

Lennox said that could be done. Then he gave Clay a warning. "Joe Alford's been on a drunk. He's mean as hell, and he's looking for you, Clay."

"I'll keep an eye open for him."

That day they started making their gather. It was hot gruelling work, and being short-handed as they were only added to their difficulties. But the herd began to grow in size. For a holding ground Clay had chosen a box canyon with a narrow entrance. One of the men brought some barbed wire Nina Alford had bought, and with this they closed off the gap. Clay had to admit it made good fencing.

Sam Lennox, however, was dubious. He said it was all right for beef, but he'd heard of a rancher who tried to use barbed wire for a corral. Some of his horses got spooked, and two of them got hung up on the wire and cut themselves to pieces.

"Funny thing; if a mule gets tangled up in barbed wire, he'll stay put till somebody gets him loose. But a horse won't."

"Which only shows that mules have more sense than a lot of humans, myself included." Clay was thinking of all the grief he had brought on himself by allowing Joe Alford to talk him into coming to New Mexico.

When he had gathered seven hundred and ninety steers he declared the roundup over. Four head had died at Kate French's when they were caught against the corral. And, to compensate for other possible losses, he let the count stand. Because of Joe Alford's present animosity, he didn't want the rancher to be able to say his partner took more than his just share of beef.

A dust cloud moving up from the south caught Clay's eye, and he alerted his men and drew his booted rifle. Steers were emerging over a rise, and riding at point was a slim figfigure in denims and a man's shirt. Something tightened in Clay at seeing Kate again, and he spurred to meet her. She wore a bandanna over her black hair to keep off the dust, but she removed this now and stuffed it into the pocket of her levis.

"It's good to see you, Kate," he said.

She regarded him levelly for a moment, while he saw the vanguard of a herd of possibly five hundred head appear.

"I'd like company on the drive to Las Rosas," she said. "Maybe you won't mind if I tag along."

There was no friendliness in her face. He found himself comparing her to Nina. The Alford woman was pretty and her blondness made her look fragile. But Kate had strength. It showed in her wide-spread eyes, the good bones in her face, her full-lipped mouth.

"I'm not driving across the Sink," he told her.

"So I've heard."

He frowned. "You'd go through Elkhart's fence with me?"

"Yes."

"But you're the girl who wanted no trouble, who wanted to play the game safe even though it meant ruin."

She bit her lip and lifted a hand to her foreman, indicating he was to hold the herd so as not to mix them with Clay's Chihuahuas. "Maybe I've learned you can't always play the game the safe way. You have to gamble."

He rode close and put a hand over her hand, that rested on the saddle horn. "I'm glad you changed your mind, Kate, but I can't let you do it. It's too risky."

"I've seen trouble before in this country."

"I know. And look what happened to your brother."

She removed her hand. "You don't have to remind me. I guess until men like Elkhart are subdued this country will always need a Jonathan French—" her gaze lowered—"or a Clay Janner."

He suddenly felt warm. "You're not still mad at me?"

She shook her black head at him. "Why should I be? You're a fiddlefoot, you always will be. No woman could ever hold you, and she'd be a fool to try." When he tried to argue, she swung her horse and said, "Give the signal when you want to start the drive."

She started to ride where her men had her herd bunched. Suddenly she drew up her horse, an exclamation of surprise on her lips.

CLAY hipped around in the saddle to see that Joe Alford had ridden up quietly, the sounds of the cattle covering his approach. He was red-eyed, and there was a three-day growth of coppery whiskers

[*Turn page*]

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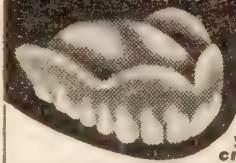

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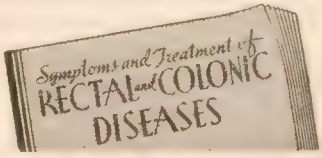


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on his cheeks. He stepped down and slapped away his buckskin horse. He was unsteady on his feet.

"Get down, Clay," Alford said thickly.

There was a dryness in Clay's throat as he dismounted. He saw the quick fear in Kate's eyes as she tore her gaze from big Joe Alford and looked at him. Sam Lennox was looking their way from the mouth of the canyon where the Chihuahuas were held.

"You're drunk, Joe," Clay said, trying to put scorn in his voice. "Go home and tell Nina to get black coffee in you. Then come back, if you're still set on it."

Joe Alford gave a stubborn shake of his head. "I've been looking for you, Clay," he said thickly. "I saw the dust and came this way." His face tightened. "Pull your gun, Clay."

"Don't be a fool!"

"For once I'm going to fight. You're not taking Nina away from me."

"Can't you see that this whole misunderstanding happened because Elkhart lied about Nina and me?"

Kate suddenly stepped down, came to Clay's side, and put her arm about his waist. "Clay isn't going to have two women, Joe," she said, fighting to keep her voice level. "He and I are going to be married. Go back to Nina. She loves you."

Joe Alford stiffened and shot Clay a suspicious glance out of his bloodshot eyes. For a long minute Clay looked at his partner, feeling Kate's body trembling against him, aware that her arm was tight against his waist where the ropes had rubbed him raw. But he forgot the pain and encircled the girl's own waist with his arm.

"It's true, Joe."

"It's a lie," Joe Alford said in a dead voice.

"Go home to Nina," Kate said firmly.

For a moment Alford seemed undecided. Then he went rigid. "Get away from him, Kate. When I count to three I'm going for my gun, and he'd better go for his!"

"Joe,. no!"

Kate's voice was lost as Joe Alford began to count, "One—two—"

Clay suddenly lunged against Kate, knocking her to the ground. And in the same moment he dove for Alford's legs. A gun roared in his ears and he felt something jerk the slack of his shirt.

Then he and Alford were rolling across the ground. Clay lunged to his feet, kicked Alford's gun from his hand. For a moment he stood breathing heavily. Kate had picked herself up and was brushing dust from her levis. She looked frightened.

Clay pulled Joe to his feet. "You've got to have faith in Nina and in yourself."

Alford's lips were trembling. "But Elkhart found you two together."

"Don't you see there wasn't anything between Nina and me?"

"You said that before, when Russ Hagen saw you."

Clay hesitated a moment, then said, "You won't have to worry about Hagen spreading any more stories. I killed him."

His gaze flicked to Kate, and he saw that her face had gone white. He thought, she'll truly hate me now for shooting a man.

He was surprised when Kate seemed to ignore it. She said, "The day Elkhart says he found Nina and Clay together was the day I was there with them." She looked at Alford severely. "Nina told Byrd Elkhart she wanted nothing to do with him, and to retaliate, to save his precious male ego, he spread those vile stories."

Clay picked up Alford's gun and started to jack out the shells. But Alford seemed to sober suddenly. "You don't have to do that, Clay," he said.

For a moment Clay hesitated. Then he handed the loaded gun to his partner. Alford holstered it, and wiped a forearm across his mouth. He looked at the two herds and asked what they meant. Clay told him that he was driving across Elkhart's property to Las Rosas.

Alford looked grim. "It's only fair to warn you that Elkhart says anybody that cuts his fence will be figured the same as a cowthief." Then, when neither Clay nor the girl made any comment, he got his horse and rode slowly toward Spade headquarters.

Clay shrugged off Alford's forbidding pronouncement and turned with a smile to Kate. "You really mean what you said about marrying me?"

She stepped away from him, her gaze cool

and distant. "I only said I'd marry you to try to prevent Alford from doing something foolish."

He frowned, then said, "You don't like it because I was forced to kill Hagen."

She made a small gesture. "That has nothing to do with it. I told you once today that a woman would be a fool to try to hold a man like you. I meant it."

In him was a sudden desperation to make her understand that he had had to wait all these years to find the right woman. And he had found her. But when he voiced this she seemed angered.

"I want to go with you to Las Rosas," she told him, "but as a business proposition only."

He couldn't tell whether there was a slight arrogance in her or whether her sharp declaration was to cover some inner hurt. "I didn't ask you to come with me," he said shortly. When he had ridden off to her men, he cursed himself for his peevishness.

He was determined to put her out of his mind, for, even though he wanted her, he tried to convince himself that, after all, a settled life was not for him. Montana and that free grass were looking increasingly good.

But in the next moment he felt a vast sickness when he thought of losing her.

*(To be concluded in the next issue)*

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*(Answers to the questions on page 90)*

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If you are too fat because you eat too much, if you just can't diet because you have a healthy appetite and like to eat too well, if in spite of everything you're still too fat, if you like sweets, candy, cake, and you like lots of butter, gravy, potatoes—no matter how skeptical you are you can be sure that Dr. Phillips amazing Kelpidine Candy reducing plan is a new discovery that takes off pounds and inches of ugly fat quick, safely and so easily you will hardly believe your eyes!

### AMAZING NEW SAFE DISCOVERY

Just recently scientists discovered an appetite satisfying ingredient which is now contained in Kelpidine Candy. Yes, this appetite satisfying ingredient is now combined with an essential mineral many doctors use in helping fat people lose weight! The appetite satisfying ingredient is found in many reducing products advertised on radio, TV, in magazines and newspapers and often at a much higher price! This vegetable cellulose appetite satisfying ingredient has no calories, yet expands when it absorbs water, thereby helping to give the feeling of a full contented stomach! The result is that your desire for food is cut way way down—you eat less—get the benefit of its amazing mineral—used by many doctors—and you eat less—that's the secret of losing weight!

***HERE AT LAST IS THE REDUCING CANDY YOU'VE HEARD WAS COMING!***

### Watch Fat Go From All Over The Body!

You'll see fat disappear from all over, hips, thighs, bust, chin, neck, arms, legs, etc. etc. You'll see pounds vanish like magic the first week—so Fast—so easy you won't know what's happening—yet there is no exercise no drugs—no hunger—no starvation diets!

### REDUCE OR DON'T PAY!

Yes, you pay absolutely nothing unless you grow slim, more youthful looking. You pay nothing if your friends, your family don't tell you you look slimmer and have reduced to the weight that most becomes you! You must be 100% satisfied in every way with the first package of candy or you return the Empty box for your money back! So start now and take off fat with Dr. Phillips Kelpidine Candy Reducing Plan until you've cut down to the weight and figure you want! Stop being fat! Reduce this safe, simple, easy way. Mail coupon for easy reducing today!

### MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

It must be a quick, safe, easy way to reduce, you must be entirely satisfied with your loss of weight—This candy must taste as good as or better than your favorite candy—You must find it the easiest reducing plan you ever tried. You must lose the number of pounds you want to lose. You must reduce without a hungry moment. You must get rid of dangerous excess fat or your money will be refunded—Don't delay—You have nothing to lose but excess weight, so mail coupon below now!

### SATISFIED USERS SAY!

**GIRL LOSES 35 lbs. FEELS WONDERFUL**

"Thanks to Kelpidine Candy I went from 195 lbs. to 160 lbs. . . . I feel wonderful . . . It's the best way to reduce I ever tried."

Miss H. T.
New York City, New York

**LADY LOST 27 lbs.**

"Your Kelpidine Candy tastes wonderful—Now for the first time I am not always hungry and I lost 27 lbs. already."

Mrs. N. L.
Newark, N. J.

**COUPLE BOTH LOSE WEIGHT:**

"My husband lost 15 lbs. with your candy plan and I lost 19 lbs. Your candy is delicious —we both feel fine. It's the easiest reducing plan I ever tried."

Mr. & Mrs. G. P.
Chicago, Ill.

Results vary with individuals—Your experience may or may not be the same but be sure to try it today! Your money back if you are not satisfied!

### HUNGER DECREASES!

With Kelpidine Candy your hunger decreases. You find your craving for food diminishing as the candy *counteracts hunger!* You eat two candy-tabs per day and your desire for food goes down! You find your hunger and appetite satisfied with less and less and your weight goes down! You'll find you won't have the craving for big meals of rich, fattening foods, because Kelpidine Candy counteracts the need and craving for those excessive meals! And you will feel a lot better You must reduce to the weight that most becomes you or your money back!

### IT'S DANGEROUS TO STAY FAT!

Insurance companies and doctors tell everyone that too much fat shortens your life! Fat people die years sooner than people with normal weight! So be Safe! Be Fair to yourself! Start taking off ugly fat with delicious tasting Kelpidine Candy Plan!

### KELPIDINE IS SAFE!

Kelpidine has been advertised in: American Home, Glamour, Harper's Bazaar, Esquire, Charm, See, McCall's, Needlework, Redbook, Moose, Christian Herald, Extension, Eagle and in many other magazines. It has also been advertised on TV and over 100 radio stations.

### YOU GET A LARGE BOX OF CANDY!

Try the liberal supply of Kelpidine Candy Plan on our 10 day no risk offer. Keep a record of your weight—If you are not pleased with your loss of weight, if you can taste any difference between the candy and your favorite candy, if you don't find it the easiest way to reduce you ever tried, if you don't feel full always, if you suffer a hungry moment, If you don't lose pounds and inches! Return for refund. Just fill out coupon and mail to: American Healthaids Co., Dept. K-395, Candy Division, 318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey.

### OVER ONE MILLION SATISFIED USERS!

Kelpidine has been sold since 1939, over one million people have purchased Kelpidine. Many of them have heard about Kelpidine from friends who have lost weight with it. Only recently Kelpidine Candy was improved. This New and improved Kelpidine Candy contains that amazing new safe ingredient that satisfies hunger and is designed for safe reducing!

**LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE**

**MAIL THIS NO RISK COUPON TODAY!**

**American Healthaids Co., Dept. K-440**
**318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey**

Send one package of Kelpidine Candy Plan, I enclose $2.98 on guarantee I must be delighted with my first package or money back when I return the empty package.

☐ Check here if you want 2 packages for $5.00 (Save $1.00)

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone...State.....

LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

**"Opened Door to Popularity"**

"I was able to play many pieces in a short time. Family and friends certainly surprised. Course opened door to popularity, wider circle of friends. Recently I entered amateur contest —won First Prize."—**Peter H. Kozyra, Manitoba, Canada.**

**Plays Banjo in a Short Time**

"Enjoy your lessons for the Tenor Banjo; am progressing rapidly. Lessons are so simple, anyone can understand; yet so thorough I have learned to play by note in little more than a month!" — **Andrew Schneider, Hanna, Wyoming.**

**Course Inspires Music Circle**

Shown above is Miss Mildred Cade, of Houston, Texas. She and a number of her friends are so enthusiastic about the U. S. School of Music's quick easy way of learning that they've ALL taken it up.

**"Can't Thank Your School Enough"**

"Never studied music before. Your method is easy; being your own teacher is best. After 4 lessons, I could play a few pieces. Now play any piece I like. Can't thank you enough." —**Rose Boyer, Blackwell, Mo.**

# THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

## *who never thought they could!*

### THIS FAMOUS WAY MAKES IT EASY AS A-B-C TO LEARN — EVEN IF YOU DON'T KNOW A SINGLE NOTE NOW

YOU think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they long to play some instrument — the piano, accordion, violin, guitar, saxophone or some other favorite. But they denied themselves the pleasure—because they **thought** it took months and years of tedious study to learn!

***Learn in Spare Time at Home***

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home—without a private teacher—without tedious study—and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! They were amazed to find how easy it was to learn!

***900,000 Students!***

The result? over 900,000 men and women have taken up music at home this simple A-B-C way. Now, all over the world, enthusiastic music-lovers are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of creating their own music. They have found the key to good times, and popularity.

900,000 STUDENTS 58 Successful Years

***Costs Only Few Cents a Lesson***

And that's what you can do, right now. NO TEDIOUS PRACTICING OF BORING SCALES AND EXERCISES! Even if you don't know a single note now, you'll "start right in on pieces." This builds up your skill and confidence so rapidly that soon you'll be able to play ALL your favorite songs and compositions **by note.** It's all so clearly explained — so EASY to understand — that even children "catch on" at once.

Why not let this famous home study method bring the many pleasures of music into YOUR life! New friends. Extra money from playing or teaching. Greater **listening** pleasure. Possibly a brilliant career. Best of all, the deep **personal** satisfaction of being able to make your own music—provide your own entertainment.

### CHOOSE YOUR FAVORITE INSTRUMENT

Now it's easy to learn — by note — Piano, Guitar, Piano Accordion, Violin, Hawaiian Guitar, Mandolin, Trumpet, Cornet, Saxophone, Tenor Banjo, Organ, Ukulele, Clarinet, Trombone, Flute, Piccolo, Modern Elementary Harmony. Write **your** choice in coupon.

**Becomes Famous Band Leader**

The Champagne Music of LAWRENCE WELK'S orchestra is enjoyed by millions. He writes: "I got my start with a U. S. School Course. How easy it is to learn to read notes and play an instrument this 'teach - yourself' way! You did so much for me that I've enrolled my two daughters."

## FREE BOOK

Let us PROVE that what we say is true. See for yourself why our School has been so successful for 58 years. Mail the coupon and we'll gladly send you our valuable 36-page FREE BOOK. No obligation; no salesman will call on you.

**U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC, Studio 1441, Port Washington, N. Y.**

(Special Reduced prices on instruments to our students.)

### Mail this for FREE BOOK

**U.S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC, Studio 1441 Port Washington, N. Y.**

Please send me FREE Book. No salesman will call upon me. I'm interested in playing (name instrument).

☐ I do ☐ I do *NOT*—have instrument now.

Name_____
(Please Print)

Address_____

City_____ Zone____ State____